

Message

in

a

Bottle

She sat on the edge of the beach with parchment and a quill, crying her eyes out. She was so hurt and all she wanted to do was walk into the ocean and drown herself but she couldn't. She had to keep living, for her friends. They would be distraught without her. Slowly, as to not hurt herself further, she lifted her quill and placed it on the parchment, beginning to write. To who, she wasn't quite sure.

To whomever finds this letter,

Someone once told me that life wasn't supposed to be fair. I always thought that was just something people said when trying to cheer you up but now I know that they were right. Nothing is fair and I guess that's the way it's supposed to be. I never expected anything like THIS to happen but I guess I wasn't supposed to expect it. Everything in life is so unexpected. But why did it have to happen to me? Why did she have to leave? Why did she leave me with him? Why did he have to become so cruel once she left?

It's my stepfather. My real dad... well I never knew him. My mum said he left her the moment she told him she was pregnant. So she got married to her 'best friend' because she didn't want to have a bastard child. But it wound up being a huge mistake because now she left me all alone with him and I'm miserable every day. I can't tell anyone what he does to me. It's too humiliating to even write but I can tell you that it's awful. Every day I go through the same exact thing. I wake up, I come out of my room, I do something wrong, and he 'punishes' me.

I just need someone to save me. Maybe my life can work out like that movie, Superman. Maybe someone that's already in my life is like Clark Kent and I'm like Lois Lane. And the next time I'm being 'punished' he'll come and save me only I won't know it's him because he'll be in his Superman disguise. And then we'll fall in love and fly off into the sunset. Of course, that only happens in the movies. And my life is NOTHING like the movies.

So it appears as though I am caught in this hellhole with no

escape. Maybe one day, I'll be free.

***But that day will only be when the angels come to bring me
home. Until then,***

Stranded

She quickly put the parchment in a bottle and corked it. She stood up and ran to the rocks on the edge of the water. She walked her way to the end and threw the bottle as far as she could. At least someone would know her true life.

Draco Malfoy sat on the beach, questioning his entire life. His father was out of Azkaban after the ministry found him innocent. How they came upon that decision, he would never understand. But he would pay for their mistake every day of his life. he avoided his father as much as possible and begged his mother to do the same but she wouldn't listen. No matter how often he'd beat her, she still run back to him, saying that he only did it because he loved her.

He stood up and began walking but he was weak so he collapsed on the sand. 'Damn my father!' he thought to himself.

As he was lying there, a bottle washed up on the shore. It appeared as though there was a letter inside. So, he carefully uncorked the bottle and took out the note.

By the end of the letter, Draco had tears in his eyes, which is odd because he had never cried before, even through his fathers beatings. But now he was so saddened by this letter that he could no longer hold back. Before he knew what he was doing, he had ran inside and taken out a piece of parchment and began writing.

Dear

Stranded,

I know exactly how you feel. My father beats me as well. I'd never tell anyone outright either. Too embarrassing. But I get what you were saying about superman and all. It would be wonderful to fly off into the sunset with a girl I truly loved.

I'm glad that I found your letter. It's nice to know that someone else is going through some of the same problems, even though I would not wish it upon anyone, even my arch nemesis. I'm sorry to hear about your mother. I can't really say I know much about losing a parent but sometimes it feels as though I have. My mom is just a shell of a woman that once was vivacious and beautiful. Now she just exists. My dad beats her real bad. Most of the time, I try to take the heat off of her by making him mad at me but I'm not around during the year so I can't save her then. Only during the summer and on holidays. I go to a boarding school. It's the

*only place I feel safe. Do you have someplace like that, where
you can go and feel protected?*

Your new friend,

Beaten Dragon

He tied it to his owl's leg and then held up her letter to her nose. "Find the person that wrote this letter and give her mine. Wait around for her response, then come back as quick as possible." The black owl flew off in a rush and for the first time in a long while, he smiled. He had made a friend. His only fear was that maybe she was a muggle and would be frightened by an owl but it didn't matter. As long as she would talk with him. In all honesty, he had nothing against muggles. It wasn't as though they were bad people, just not magical. He could live with that though.

It was mudbloods that he didn't understand. Not that he hated them though. He just didn't understand them. How could two muggles produce a witch or a wizard? He especially didn't understand Hermione Granger, perfect little Gryffindor. She was a mystery to him. She was the smartest witch in his year and by far the prettiest, but was conceived by muggles. How was that possible? He hated the fact that she was so beautiful but he had admitted it to himself long ago, in third year right after she slapped him. He didn't want to admit it, but it was true.

Anyway, he walked down the stairs of his summer estate and found his father waiting at the bottom of the staircase. "Do you know what time it is? You've been gone for hours! Where have you been boy?"

Draco grabbed his jacket and prepared to go out again even though he knew it would never happen. "I took a walk on the beach. What does it matter? You never care about me! Stop trying to pretend to be a 'caring' father now!"

Lucius raised his wand and pointed it at his son's chest. "How dare you! I've fed you, clothed you, kept a roof over your head and THIS is how you repay me? By insulting me? CRUCIO!"

And so began a night of savage torture.

Hermione was laying in her room, trying to stay away from him for as long as possible. He had come again, right after she wrote the letter. He had been angry that she had left the house and the bruised all over her body were proof of that anger. It hurt to move and she wasn't breathing regularly. She knew that in his last fit of fury, he had broken at least two ribs.

Quietly, she rummaged through her school trunk, looking for something. When she found it, she tried to smile in delight but found that it hurt too much. It was a bottle of Skelegrow. She had borrowed some from Madame Pomfrey in sixth year when Harry had broken his arm in a fight he had gotten into with Malfoy. She had forgotten to return it and by accident, brought it home with her.

She laid down on her bed and raised her shirt, assessing all of the bruises. "Fuck," she cursed under her breath. Apparently, he had been so violent with her that one of the bones was breaking through the skin. She drank the potion quickly due to its awful taste. It burned as it slithered down her throat. "I hate magical potions."

Suddenly, an owl flew in through her open window. She knew it wasn't Harry or Ron because the owl was large and black. It flew to her side and appeared as though it was sniffing out her scent, trying to match it with something. It must have found it because it then held out its leg to her for her to take the letter. She did so and began to read:

Dear

Stranded,

I know exactly how you feel. My father beats me as well. I'd never tell anyone outright either. Too embarrassing. But I get what you were saying about Superman and all. It would be wonderful to fly off into the sunset with a girl I truly loved.

I'm glad that I found your letter. It's nice to know that someone else is going through some of the same problems, even though I would not wish it upon anyone, even my arch nemesis. I'm sorry to hear about your mother. I can't really say I know much about losing a parent but

sometimes it feels as though I have. My mom is just a shell of a woman that once was vivacious and beautiful. Now she just exists. My dad beats her real bad. Most of the time, I try to take the heat off of her by making him mad at me but I'm not around during the year so I can't save her then. Only during the summer and on holidays. I go to a boarding school. It's the only place I feel safe. Do you have someplace like that, where you can go and feel protected?

Your new friend,

Beaten Dragon

Her thoughts were racing. It was obvious through his means of transportation of the letter that he was a wizard. It was quite possible that he went to Hogwarts but she didn't really want to know that yet. She was just glad to have a friend, someone who understood her.

The owl brought her parchment, a quill, and an ink bottle, sensing that she could not get up. "Oh thank you," she said while patting its head. It hooted in response, apparently enjoying the attention.

Dear Beaten Dragon,

I'm so sorry to hear that someone knows how I feel. I would not wish that upon anyone. I'm glad that you wrote back. I'd like it very much if we could become pen pals. Yes, I feel safe at my best friend's house. He had many brothers and a younger sister and they all live in this one really tiny house that can hardly fit them all in. You can't go anywhere in that place without running into somebody. It's quite enjoyable, really. I don't be going there this summer, though.

Does your mum really allow your father to abuse you both like that? That's just awful. My stepfather never laid a hand on me until my mum was gone, even as I was growing up and needed to be 'punished' he would only ground me. I used to think he was my real dad. Now that was a laugh. I always argued with him as a child and now that I'm grown, things have yet to change. He never approves of anything that I do, in fact, everything that I do aggravates him. That's when we argue. But now that my mum is gone, he doesn't use his words to argue his point. I don't think I'll ever really be able to say

exactly what he does, but I think you get what I mean.

That's odd. The phone just rang. I would pick it up but I'm not allowed. It doesn't matter because my friends don't use the telephone and even if they did, they wouldn't call me. We write to each other though I have yet to receive a single letter from them all summer. I suspect he has something to do with that. The phone stopped ringing now. He must have answered it. I hope it didn't wake him up. He's always angry when he gets woken up.

Anyway, when my mum left us, he told me he wasn't my real dad and that he had adopted me at birth. He told me that he had always hated my real father and I don't blame him. When he told me who my father was, I nearly died in shock and fright. I had met him before, once or twice. Gods he's just awful. He doesn't know I'm his daughter though. No one does. He doesn't know who my mum is. I met him through a friend of mine. My friend and he are what you would call enemies and they have had many, what's the word I'm looking for... disputes. Yes, they've had disputes. So I defended my friend. That's the only reason my dad knows who I am. But he still has no idea that he is my father. I took my stepfathers last name.

Moving on to a subject I care more about... are you a wizard? If not, that question will seem odd but I'm guessing you are because you owled me. By the way, what's your owls name? He is absolutely beautiful. My best friend has this gorgeous white owl that I used to think was the most amazing creature in the world but now I know that was a lie. Your owl surpasses his by far.

Um... I hear footsteps coming which is never a good thing. I'd better go. Please write back.

Your new friend,

Stranded

Hurriedly, she tied the letter to the owls leg, gave him a small snack to eat and then sent him off. She rolled over onto her stomach, despite the pain, and pretended to be asleep. A few seconds later, she heard the door creaking open and the footsteps coming closer.

"You asleep, girl?" he asked. She could literally smell the alcohol on his breath and knew instantly that he was intoxicated. He was only a few feet from her and she prayed that he would just leave. He pushed her over onto her back. No such luck, she thought in horror. "Wake up, girl!" he commanded while shaking her brutally. It was a good thing that the skelegrow had kicked in. She slowly opened her eyes, making it seem as though she had just woken up. "I got a phone call a few minutes ago, from one of your friends. Harry Potter. I told you that you weren't allowed to talk to anyone over the summer."

"I...I..." she stumbled for the words to get her out of a punishment. "I told him not to call. HONEST! Please don't hurt me." She was near crying now but he didn't care. He just climbed on top of her, straddling her waist.

"You know how I hate being disrupted from whatever I'm doing. That phone call woke me up!"

"Well if I could just talk to them, remind them not to call maybe..."

"No!" he said, slapping her across the face. "No phone for you! But now that your friend has woken me up..." he said with an evil grin. "I need something to make me tired again." Fiercely, he stripped off her shirt and attacked her breasts with his teeth. She yelped out in pain which annoyed him greatly. He ripped off a piece of her already torn shirt and gagged her. Then he tied her wrists to the bed posts. "No I can have my fun," he snickered. She just closed her eyes and let it happen, trying not to cry or scream out from the hurt she felt every time he thrust himself further and further into her. He was brutal, the way he grabbed her, the way he bit through the soft flesh of her breasts. She passed out halfway through.

Tap, Tap, Tap...

Tap, Tap, Tap...

Draco Malfoy woke up to the sound of tapping on his window. It was his owl with a letter from her. He ran to the window as fast as he could (which wasn't very fast considering his limp that his father had given him) and opened it up.

He allowed the owl in and took the letter from him.

When he was done, he took out a piece of parchment and wrote:

My new friend,

Yes, I am a wizard. Are you a witch? By the way, my owl's name is Damion. He is very gorgeous, I agree. He's been with the family for quite some time. When we first got him, my mum used to enter him in those owl beauty contests you always hear about in the wizarding community. He always won so eventually, the judges asked us to stop entering and so we did.

So are you a pureblood witch if you are a witch at all? Why do you hate your father so much? I mean, if you don't really know him that well, then how can you know if you hate him?

Your stepdad knew your true father? How? With everything I know about you now, I'd say you could write a great book. It'd definitely be a best seller. I love books. Not many know my true love for knowledge. All people know about me is that I'm a pureblooded bully. But I really do love books. And I love school. My favorite class is Potions but I really would love to study muggles. My father won't let me, though I think they're fascinating. I can't tell people. It would ruin my pureblood muggle hating image. (That's probably a good thing but father wouldn't agree and I don't need to piss him off anymore that I already do.) It is early in the morning now and father just left to go to work. Thank the Gods. I hate him so much, it is

unbelievable. Can't he just DIE!

I feel for some reason as though I can talk to you. I want to tell you everything about me. You seem like a trustworthy person.

I must go now, but I look forward to your next letter. Please write back as soon as possible. Damion will wait for whenever you are ready.

Waiting in anticipation,

Beaten Dragon

Her eyes were swollen shut. She could barely open them. he had been very angry at her that evening. A tapping could be hear from the window and she reached under her pillow, pulling out her wand. Students were allowed to use magic after sixth year and she was going into seventh. She directed the wand at the window and said a spell to open it. The black owl flew in once more. She was so weak that she didn't even move to retrieve the letter.

"Please, just put the letter down on my desk. When I am feeling better, I shall read it. You can stay here for now. I set some food out for you on the desk over there. I figured you'd be tired from the flight back and forth."

He hooted his response and began eating as she fell into a deep sleep, too tired for anything else.

It had been a whole week since Damion had left. Why had he not returned? Draco wasn't weak anymore. His father had left him alone for a while.

He was pacing around his room contemplating how much his life sucked, when Damion flew in the window. "It's about bloody time!" he yelled at the owl that had placed the letter down on his chair. It read:

Dearest

Dragon,

I am so sorry that it took me this long to respond. I was... recovering from one of my confrontations with him. Remember that telephone ring I mentioned? Well it was from a friend of mine from school and my step dad, he didn't like that too much.

I am a witch, a seventh year at school and a pureblood. But it wasn't always that way. I used to believe that I was a muggle born. I was told that my mum and "dad" were muggles. But after my mum was ...gone, I found out the truth... that they both had been wizards. And my true father, he is a wizard as well.

I hate him though, as I've told you before. Why? That's simple. He's a bloody murderer. Killed my best friends parents, that's what he did. AND he got away with it! I'd love nothing more than to send him to Azkaban.

Apparently, the story goes like this. They were all the best of friends growing up. The problem was that my step dad loved my mum, and so did my real dad. But then my mum chose my dad. When she got pregnant, my dad left her. My step dad took her in and married her and they ran away to the muggle community to hide from my dad. Why hide, you may ask? Well it's because, like I said earlier, he became a bloody murderer! They were frightened of him. They were afraid he'd come after me and try to kill me. He begged my mum to have the abortion. Why? Another good question.

The thing about my mum is that she loved muggles. She loved them so much that she used to beg him to move to the muggle world with

her. But he HATES muggles, always has and he always will. That's why he kills. That's his reason for killing. So when she got pregnant, he was afraid that my mum would raise me to be just like her – a muggle lover. He just couldn't have that. At least, that's the way my stepfather told the story to me. I always suspected that there was more but I guess I'll never know without talking to my mum but that's not going to happen.

Anyway, I'm glad you feel you can talk to me. I feel the same way. It's much easier to write things down and send them off to someone who will listen to you. My only fear is that I may never meet you in person. That would be awful.

School starts soon and I'm thankful to be getting away from my stepfather though I doubt he will let me leave. He'll probably be too afraid that I will tell someone the dirty little secret but I wouldn't tell anyone in all honesty. It'd be too embarrassing.

I have a favor to ask of you. It's nothing big; just I can't do it myself. Se, I can't leave the house and I'm out of skelegrow. I fear my next encounter will leave many more of my bones broken and it would be very difficult to survive through that pain though I've done it before.

Thanks in advance, but if you don't do it, I'll still thank you. You're one of the few people I trust in this world and you're the only person I trust with THIS information.

Can't wait for your next letter,

Stranded Still

Hermione was doing some of her summer homework, trying to keep busy in order not to think too much about her life. Damion flew in and she patted his head. "Hello, Damion. Have you got a letter for me?" He dropped a large package in her lap and she read the attached note.

Hey

Stranded,

No problem. I've got tons of skelegrow. I also sent over some Bruise Butter. It's like body butter but when you rub it on, it gets rid of the bruises. And then, I also sent you some Scar Salve. It heals scars, though it doesn't make them go away. Sorry 'bout that. But these three magical medicines have been my best friends since I was a child. I hope they save you as well.

I fear as well that we will never meet. If my father would ever allow me out of the house, trust me, I would find you. But my home is my prison and I am trapped for all eternity.

I don't want to ask you of your name or heritage yet because I will not tell you mine. It is not that I don't trust you but I would be too embarrassed. I am not from an unknown family. Most people know my name and fear it. I do not want you to fear me.

I find you the most intriguing person I have ever met. I wish so dearly that I could meet you in person. One day... I'll be your superman. I cannot bare the thought of you being hurt and I swear if it's the last thing I do... well it probably would be the last thing I'd do so I won't even finish the sentence.

On a lighter not, my dad left me alone all week. He said I needed a rest. I don't know why he said that but I was grateful. He can be such a brutal bastard sometimes.

School starts next week. Do you know if you are going? I hope you get to go. It sounds like you need a long break from him. And it would probably do you good to see your friends again.

From everything you told me about your read dad, he sounds a lot like Voldemort. I pray that is incorrect but if it is true, do not tell me for I already pity your life enough. I've heard stories of Voldemorts youth. He loved a woman and asked her to get rid of their child but there were more complications to it. I know the story in length though I am one of the few who do. My father told it to me as a bed time story when I was younger. What a lovely way to spend my nights, having nightmares of one of the cruelest men ever born.

Getting away from that topic because it just scares me, my mum said she would take me to Diagon Alley in a few days to get school supplies. Do you need anything while I am there... new school robes, books, anything? I'd be more than happy to buy some for you.

Write back quickly,

Dragon.

She wrote a note back as quickly as possible, anxious for his next letter. When she was done, she tied it to Damion's leg along with a small bag of coins. Then, she set to work with the Bruise Butter and the Scar Salve.

August thirty-first came and Hermione was a bundle of nerves. She had yet to ask HIM if she could go back and she decided not to. She crept down the stairs. She had shrunken her trunk and it was in her pocket. Dragon had sent her all the books and her money back but he had not gotten her a dress robe. Oh well. She stepped out the door and began to run.

She decided it was best just to leave and run as fast as she could. She would be safe at school and she would never go 'home' again.

She soon remembered after running for about fifteen minutes that she had gotten her apparating license and there was no need to be running. She hid behind a tree and apparated to Kings Cross. She closed her eyes real tight and opened them again after hearing a POP sound. The sight of people made her smile as she had been cooped up all summer in her room. She began walking through the crowded area and was about to run between platforms nine and ten when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Thought you'd escaped, didn't you?" a voice drawled from behind her. He led her into the back of the station where no one could see them.

"Please let me go," she pleaded. "Let me go back to school. I won't be a hassle to you any longer. I'll be out of your hair and I promise I'll never come back. Please. I even promise not to tell anyone."

He smacked her across the face and she let out a yelp of pain. "I'm going to put you in your place, you little whore." He was about to begin his torture once more and she closed her eyes tight, hoping it would be over soon but nothing ever happened. She opened her eyes to find him lying on the ground unconscious.

"Excuse me, miss. Are you okay?" A man asked. He had just saved her from her stepfather and she was grateful. She looked up at him and was shocked at who it was. His dark brown raven hair, deep green eyes, out of style glasses, and lightning shaped scar gave him away.

"H...H...Harry?"

she

asked.

He looked at her and suddenly realization dawned upon his face. "Hermione? Are you okay? Who is that man? What's going on?"

He took her into an embrace. "Harry, thank you," she cried into his shoulder. She began shuddering involuntarily and he held her closer, trying to get her to calm down and forget all her problems but it wasn't working. The train was leaving in five minutes and he knew he had to get them on it so they could go to school and sort everything out so he scooped her up in his arms and walked through the barrier between the two platforms. He carried her onto the train and she fell asleep in his arms.

Message in a Bottle

Chapter 8

The day to go back to school came and Draco jumped for joy. He couldn't wait to get away from his father. As he walked through Kings Cross, he noticed a man lying unconscious on the floor. Taking him as nothing more than a drunk homeless man, he ran through the platform and got on the train.

Days before, he had received his Hogwarts letter saying that he was to be the Head Boy. He would have thought his father would be proud but that was not the case. It appeared as though the prestigious title had been expected and there was no pat on the back for him.

He roamed through the train in search of his supposed friends, Crabbe and Goyle, but couldn't find them anywhere and so instead went to the Head Boy Head Girl compartment. On his way there, he peered in to a compartment and found the three people that always made his life hell while at school. Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter, and Hermione Granger. The weird thing was that Granger was asleep in Potter's arms.

"Well, well, well..." he said with a smirk. "If it isn't the Boy-Who-Lived and his two sidekicks."

"Shh..." Potter said. "Can't you see that she's sleeping?" he whispered to Draco.

Malfoy scowled and left their compartment with the urge to hit someone. He may not have been evil, and he may not have hated muggle born witches and wizards, but he DID hate Harry Potter and his friends.

The moment he got to the Head Compartment, he wrote a letter to Stranded, getting all his feelings of anger and hate off of his mind.

Dearest

Stranded,

I left for school today. As I got on the train, I suddenly realized that I hate and yet love going away to school at the same time. I love it because it allows me to get away from my dad but I also hate it because of some people who shall remain nameless. Gods why do people always have to be such arses.

Did HE let you come to school? I hope so. I'd love to meet sometime. Maybe not yet but sometime soon, I think we should meet. You seem like you'd make a great friend. If only I had someone like you in my life, I'd never let any harm come to you.

Don't ever forget that you are precious, maybe not to anyone else but at least to me, you are precious. If we never meet I want you to know that you have changed my world. I look around at everyone and they look so happy and when I see their happiness immediately, I grow angry and resentful. But then I think, well maybe they're just like me and stranded and everything looks great on the outside but inside, their world is hell. That's like you too, right? You put on a facade and so people think that everything's okay. Well at least that's what I always thought about you but maybe I'm wrong.

Oh well, until you write back,

Dragon

(In a compartment close by...)

Harry held her close as she trembled in her sleep. It was obvious that she was having a night mare but he couldn't seem to wake her up and so he decided on letting her sleep. He laid her down on the bench and put her head on his lap. This seemed to calm her and she soon began to look peaceful. Maybe the nightmare had subsided.

"What happened?" Ron asked Harry as soon as he noticed Hermione's assuaged appearance.

"I have no idea, Ron," Harry told him. "I was walking through King's Cross, about to pass through the platform when I heard a scream. I ran to where I heard the noise coming from and there she was with

some greasy slime ball all over her as if he were about to... about to..." He trailed off, leaving it to both of their imaginations.

The two boys looked at each other, both wide eyed and curious as to who this evil man was and what exactly he wanted from her. Only when their female friend woke up would they know the answer.

(Hermione's Nightmare)

She was running through a tunnel. It was dark and misty, she could hardly see a thing. Running her hands along the wall, she began running faster, moving towards a light. Just a little further. She was almost there.

As soon as she got close to the light, she felt a cold hand wrap around her waist and his alcohol stench breath breezing in her ear. "You're mine, you little whore!" He brought a knife out from behind his back and was about to stab her with it but then someone grabbed his arm and flipped him around to look in his face.

"No one hurts Hermione while I'm around," he said while sticking her stepfather with his own knife.

And so she slept soundly knowing that when she woke up, her dreamland would be gone and she'd have to face the music.

Her eyes drifted open, sitting up slowly and taking in her surroundings. Across from her sat a ball of red flames. Wait no. It was a boy. Her eyes finally began to focus and she recognized the boy as one of her two best friends. "Hello, Ron," she said while resting her head against the head rest and leaning back. Looking to her right, she saw the boy who had not too long ago saved her from one of the cruelest men in the world. "Harry," she said sounding grateful.

"MIONE!" she said once they both realized that she was awake. "How are you feeling?" Harry asked. "Better?"

She smiled numbly at him and replied, "Thanks to you." Suddenly she noticed that her clothes were torn and she felt too exposed to be around any member of the male population. "Would you two mind leaving for just a moment while I get changed? I'm a mess. I really need to get out of these icky clothes."

"Yeah, sure 'Mione," Ron said. "Anything for you. We'll be back in a few." They stood up and left, walking through the corridors looking for a bunch of their friends. They found Neville, Seamus, Dean and a few other boys in a compartment close by.

"Hey guys," Harry said.

"Hey, Harry," Neville replied. "Hey, Ron. How are you guys doing? What'd you do over the summer?"

"Not much," Ron responded dully sounding very bored. "Stayed at the Burrow with Fred and George pestering me and so I helped them a little bit with the store."

"That sounds good. What about you, Harry?"

"Well there was some weird stuff going on this summer but I want to talk to Hermione first. I'm not quite sure what it all meant and I want her to analyze it first before I tell anyone else about it."

"Okay," Neville said with a slight frown, disappointed to be left out.

"Well where is Hermione anyway? I haven't seen her yet!" Seamus
nearly shouted.

Harry and Ron both sighed and looked at each other, trying to think of
something to say. "She um... wanted to get changed a little early,"
Ron said.

"Why?" Dean asked.

"She was tired and so she was sleeping. She just woke up about five
minutes ago and I don't know. All of a sudden she asked us to leave
so she could change!"

"We'd better get back now," Harry sighed. "We told her we'd be right
back." They said their goodbyes and went back to their usual
compartment where they found Hermione staring out the window,
wearing her school robes.

"Hermione? Are you ready to talk now?" Ron asked.

She snapped her head around and looked at them, a lonely tear
trickled down her cheek. "He...he... it wasn't always like this. He used
to be like... like a father to me. I...I...I just don't get it. I don't
understand what happened to him."

"Who?" Harry asked. "Hermione, who was that man?"

"I...I...I don't know where to start..." but she knew she had to. She had
to tell him everything now. He had saved her. He deserved to know
and so she would have to explain what he saw. And so she began.
"Well this is going to be hard to explain so please bare with me." The
boys both took a seat on the bench across from her and she stared at
the door, not wanting to see their faces as she explained her summer
to them.

"I got home after school ended last year and my... well I was informed
that my mother was...gone. It happened right after I had gone away to
school for sixth year and he didn't want to tell me in a letter so he
waited 'til I came home. And then I started noticing changes in him.

He drank a lot. A WHOLE lot. He seemed to be always getting smashed. And he told me that I was adopted and it turned out to be the truth but I'm not quite ready to tell everyone who my real parents are yet but anyway...I knew he was depressed over my mum but I never knew the extent of his sadness until... Well one day I left the house to go and see one of my muggle friends and I kind of forgot to ask him if I could and so... he was angry. He came after me while I was sleeping the next evening. And it's been like that almost every day since the summer started and so I snuck out this morning but he followed after me and I think he was going to try to hurt me again but you, Harry... you save me from that so I thank you."

She looked at her two best friends to watch as they stood up, getting out of their seats, and came to give her a huge group hug, lifting her from her sitting position and up so she was standing and they could embrace. "It was me who called," Harry said shamefully. "He told me that you weren't allowed to talk, especially not to boys. I'd assume that got you in a lot of trouble so I'm real sorry."

Tears poured out now at random not caring if anyone saw her crying. "It's okay, Harry. He would have found ANY excuse. What did you call about anyway?"

He shook his head. "No. Right now, it's all about you. We'll talk about me later. Right now, you need our help!"

And so the three Gryffindor's were reunited after a summer apart.

Meanwhile, Draco Malfoy was busy getting rid of Pansy.

"Get your chubby hands off of me, you stupid cow!" he screamed. "You're such a whore! Why on earth would you ever think that I would want you? You're foul and dirty and that doesn't arouse me at all!"

With that, he ran out of the Head Compartment and to a place where he knew she would never look for him. The Golden Trio's compartment.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Malfoy?" Harry asked. "You're not welcome."

He scanned the compartment and took in everything that he saw. Potter was standing up facing him, reaching inside his pocket for his wand. Weasley was sitting on the bench, holding Hermione tightly as if trying to protect her from Malfoy's words. Her face was tear stained and for a moment he thought about Stranded and what she was doing at that exact moment. He couldn't wait to get to school so that he could go find Damion and send the note to her.

"Relax, Scarhead," Draco hissed. "I'll be gone shortly. I just needed a place to hide from Parkinson. As soon as she loses my scent, I'll be going back to the head cabin. No worries. I certainly wouldn't want to stay in here with the likes of you, Potter."

Harry scoffed at what Draco said. "And what makes you think that we won't just go out in the hallway and scream to Pansy that you're right here?"

"Because then I'll tell the whole school that I found Granger crying, and of course I'll make up some rumor about WHY she was crying and I know you wouldn't want that now would you?"

They all glared at him and then Harry took a seat across from Ron and Hermione making sure to take up the whole bench intentionally to piss Malfoy off. "That's all right," Draco said. "Granger's so close to Weasley that she left half the bench for me to sit." And so he took a seat right next to Hermione. As he sat down, he noticed bite marks on her neck. He didn't bother to ask where she got them figuring she'd had an 'adventurous' night.

The cabin was silent for an overly long period of time. He sat in there for at least a half hour. Finally, Malfoy got up and walked over to the door. "I'm leaving now. Pansy is sure to have forgotten about me by now. I'm going to go to the Head's Compartment. Head Boy and Girl are supposed to go up there for the last half hour of the ride to discuss duties so let's go, Granger."

"HUH?" Hermione said. "I didn't... I'm not... Head Girl?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Stop playing dumb, Granger. You had to have

gotten the letter. You're Head Girl and I'm Head Boy and we have to
go to our cabin now."

With that, he walked out and waited in the doorway as she said
goodbye to her friends. She stood up slowly and whispered into
Potter's ear. It sounded like, "He must've confiscated all my mail,"
and then she left, Malfoy following right behind her.

When they got to the head compartment, they found McGonagall there waiting for them. "Well hello you two," she greeted them. "Please, take your seats and we'll get started." They took their seats right across from her and she began.

"Congratulations on making Head Boy and Girl. Now along with this prestigious title, you have certain duties to fulfill. You are in charge of dividing the patrol duty between all the prefects. I want you to make sure that you don't let anyone patrol alone. It's not smart, even with Hogwarts being the safest place. Next, you are in charge of the Halloween feast, the Yule Ball, and the seventh year ball. You must get the food, entertainment, and decorations prepared. Check with me before you do everything. Also, you will have certain assignments, just to keep you on your toes. These assignments will be given to you by the headmaster so I do not know what they will be yet." She continued on for a while but Draco tuned her out.

He couldn't get something out of his mind. Those marks on Granger's neck. It was a widely known fact throughout the school that she was a virgin. In fact, it was a known fact that she had never even had a boyfriend. So where did those marks come from?

Then his thoughts ran to Stranded. Where was she at this very moment? Was she okay? Was she hurt? He needed to know.

Hermione was having very similar thoughts. She hoped to God that no one had seen the marks. They were just embarrassing. She didn't want anyone to know. She didn't even want them to get the wrong idea, thinking she had been with some guy over the summer. It wasn't true. Her summer consisted of her staying in her room, hiding from HIM.

And what was up with him stealing her mail? She hadn't received a single letter, not even the one from Hogwarts telling her what books she needed. It was a good thing she had memorized the book list last year before school ended so she could ask Dragon to get her the books.

Speaking of Dragon... she wished so very much right now that she could talk to him right now. He always seemed to care so much about her. And she wondered how he was doing. She was sure that his father would let him go to school but probably not without putting him down first. She only hoped that Dragon didn't listen to him. From what she could tell, he was too nice for anyone to ever make him feel bad.

She was brought out of her thoughts by McGonagall standing up. "Well now that I've got that said, I'll be off. You two sit in here and work things out. I understand you two have never been the...best of friends, but as Head Boy and Girl, you'll have to get along so you might as well start now."

And so she left them alone but neither one wanted to "work things out". Instead, they sat in silence for most of the ride, finding little to say to one another. Each was lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, about half way through their ride of silence, Hermione said, "So can we just call it a truce, Malfoy? I really can't be fighting with you all year. Let's just...put the past behind us."

He thought about it for a moment and then came to his decision. "I don't think so Granger. You're still nothing but a filthy little mudblood." Now the truth was that he didn't mind muggle borns let alone muggles, but the way he saw it was that his father already hated him enough. Why add on the fact that he was being civil to a mudblood? And not just ANY mudblood, but Hermione Granger, best friend of Harry Potter and the only person in the whole school who could always get better marks than him even in his best class, Potions.

"You're so immature," she muttered underneath her breath. Why couldn't he just give in? She didn't understand him.

"At least I'd have enough common sense to get rid of my hickeys!" he screamed at her. And as the words left his mouth, she began to look panicked, as if he had discovered some big secret. For a reason beyond his understanding, he took pity on her and performed a simple charm to make them disappear. "There you go! Now you owe me, Granger."

She couldn't say anything. The whole thing had horrified her too much. All she knew was that he had gotten a good glimpse at her neck and probably saw a lot more than he should have and so the rest of the ride was finished in silence.

When the train came to a stop, she left the compartment as soon as possible, not wanting to be in there for a second longer. But she didn't go by Harry and Ron. Instead, she found her own carriage and rode up to the school in peace, all by herself. As soon as she got in, she took out a piece of parchment and began to write.

Dear

Dragon,

I'm miserable. I came to school but now that I'm here, I feel like running back. I was forced to tell my friends today about everything. Don't ask me how because it's a long story but after I finished speaking, they took me in an embrace. It felt awkward and weird and I just wanted to run and hide but I allowed them to hug me. I don't want to alienate myself.

I wish so badly that I could talk to you in person, have you take all my pain away. Gods I hate this life so much! My friends, they're trying so hard to be understanding, as if they know what I'm going through, but no one understands. They just don't get me like you do.

Stranded

As soon as she was done writing the message, Damion flew into her carriage with a note. She read it and gave him her note, giving it some owl snacks for his troubles.

Once she got to school, she met up with Harry and Ron at the Gryffindor table. They asked her where she had been on the carriages and she made up a lie about having to go to a Head Compartment. How would they know if she was lying?

After the feast, which was rather pointless and boring unless you were a first year, she followed Professor McGonagall to the Head Tower where she would be staying with her counterpart, Malfoy. They

reached a portrait with a burly man standing in its frame. He was about 6'5" with rather grotesque muscles. He had a short brown beard and a long mustache. "Halt, who goes there?" he asked in a grouchy voice.

"I'm...Hermione Granger," she said with caution, afraid to annoy him. "I'm...head girl."

He looked between her and Draco and then back to her. "You'll be needing a password, missy!"

Without even thinking about what she was doing, she mumbled, "Superman," and walked in.

Draco in all honesty didn't know what to think. It would make sense for her to be Stranded, all the signs were there. A muggle born, liked to read, taking all the advanced courses ...SUPERMAN! Why hadn't he thought about it before? But he wanted so badly for it NOT to be her, for it all to be a big misunderstanding.

So he went up to his room and laid down on the couch as Damion flew in the window. "Got a letter already?" he asked while taking it from his pet. As soon as he was done, he scribbled down a note and sent it out to her. Then he headed downstairs for a late night snack. The Head Tower after all came with its own kitchen.

Hermione had gone straight to the living room and sat down with a good book. The room would be there later for her to look at. Right now, she needed to relax. As she was reading, she heard a hoot coming from the window. She walked up and opened it, anxious to find out what the noise maker was, sure that it was not Damion so quickly and she was right. She found Hedwig as the culprit. He came in and perched himself on the arm of the couch. She took the note and read:

Dear

Hermione,

We're so sorry about EVERYTHING! We can't stress that enough. We feel like dirt for not realizing that you were in trouble earlier. Our only hope is that one day you can forgive us.

Ron and I know that it will be a tough path for you, healing and getting better both emotionally and physically, but we want you to know that we'll be right by your side through the whole thing. We love you, 'Mione.

Love,

Harry and Ron

She was about to respond when she saw Damion fly through the already opened window. The two birds looked at each other with disgust and hatred in their eyes. She figured that they must have met in the owlery and never got along. They began circling one another and Hermione hurried up with her response, hoping to get one of them out of there quickly.

Harry and Ron,

Don't worry about me. I'm fine. See you in the morning and thanks for your care and concern.

Hermione

As fast as she could, she tied the letter to Hedwigs leg and gave him a snack, sending him on his way. Then she took out Dragons note and read:

Dear Stranded,

I think I know who you are. I'm not quite sure what to say because I don't want to lose you as a friend. There's no way around this if you are who I think you are.

I'm sorry you're having such a tough time getting back in to the routine of school and 'friends' but it'll get easier with friends like yours. Its obvious they love you.

I have to go. This is hurting my head,

Dragon

She had been so engrossed in the letter that she hadn't even realized Draco standing at the kitchen counter, watching her read the note with his jaw dropped open, knowing his suspicions had been confirmed.

She wrote back a letter and gave it to Damion while patting his head. "Take this to him and don't you dare leave him alone until he responds." She kissed the top of his head and watched him fly away. She found it rather odd when he didn't fly out the window and instead, flew to the kitchen.

Now it was her turn for jaw dropping. She was mortified as Draco took the letter from Damion and began to read.

Dragon,

I think it's time we met, regardless of what the repercussions might be. I know there's a possibility of it not working out but I have to believe that there's a chance of it working. I NEED you as a friend and I'll be damned if all I can ever be with you is pen pals. So if you want to meet, write down when and where and send Damion back. I'll be there whenever and wherever you want to meet.

Stranded

He didn't know what to do. His best friend turned out to be one of his worst enemies. They weren't allowed to be civil with one another. But then again...now he knew that she wasn't really a mudblood anymore...Father might not mind so much. In fact, if she is a pureblood, he might be quite pleased. But that didn't change the fact that she was still Hermione Granger, best friend of Harry Potter, the boy that Draco hated most.

Hermione was sitting there allowing her thoughts to go crazy as well. She was going to lose her best friend all because of their true identities. She wanted to bang her head against a wall. 'I should have never written that damned letter in the first place,' she thought to

herself in sadness. 'I should've just kept everything to myself and stayed at home and lived out the rest of my pathetic life there, with that asshole. It would have been better than being here, with Malfoy, having him know my darkest secrets.'

Malfoy was standing there letting his thoughts run wild when all of a sudden, Damion started pecking at him, demanding that he respond. He didn't know what to do so he wrote on the same parchment that she had just sent and allowed Damion to return it to her.

She was shocked that he actually responded. And his response...well it was not what she expected.

Meet me in the Head Tower Common Room IMMEDIATLEY! I'll meet you on the couch.

When she looked up from the letter, there he was, making his way to sit beside her. "Is this seat taken?" he asked, pointing the cushion right next to her. She shook her head and he sat down.

"What does this mean?" she asked nervously.

"I don't know."

They both stared at each other deciding to not say anything. Then it hit Draco. The marks, the ones on her neck! They must have been from HIM! He lifted his hand and ran it over her cheek, something he'd dreamt of doing often, reaching out to touch the girl who had become his best friend. She shivered at his touch, almost backing away. But she didn't. She stayed put. She wanted to get the point across to him that she was there to stay.

At the touch of his hand, she felt something she didn't expect. Warmth. "I always expected your skin to be so cold," she admitted.

He didn't like the comment feeling almost offended but it was irrelevant. "I'm not like my father," he responded with a crooked smile. He looked her over and was shocked. She was gorgeous. Why hadn't he noticed it before?

Her long brown hair hung in her face covering her scared expression. He pushed a few tendrils back behind her ear so he could look into her eyes. They were a mysterious dark brown, so dark in fact that they were almost black. Slowly, he leaned in and placed a kiss on her cheek. "I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner."

She responded by resting her head against his shoulder and getting comfortable on the couch. "I made a point of never trying to guess who you were. It terrified me, the thought that you could be someone I already knew."

Then something struck her like a bolt of lightning and she sat upright as quickly as she could. "You're not going to tell anyone who I am, right? I mean I know you've hated me for so long and all but..."

He put a finger up against her lips in order to silence her. "Shh...You can trust me." That was definitely a first. For the first time in his life, he had a friend and he wanted her to trust him. But not only that. He trusted her as well.

"I think I already knew that," she replied, laying back down on him.

"What are we going to do about this?"

He rested his chin on the top of her head, wrapping his arm around her. "Keep our friendship a secret, of course. My dad can't know. I wish it was different but I..."

"That's okay," she said cutting him off. "I wish it was different as well but no one would accept it. Your father, my friends, no one. It's too much to have to deal with. Let's not bother. Everything is too complicated. Let's keep our friendship simple."

Draco agreed with her logic. Simplicity was one of the most treasured things in life. Why complicate things when they were fine the way they were? He enjoyed the fact that he had a good part of his life. He sat and thought of all the little things that would make his life better this year: coming back to the common room to someone who actually cared about him, knowing there was someone in the stands during Quidditch matches that was actually cheering him on (even if it was a silent cheering), having someone to talk to about anything that bothered him, feeling like for once, he had a reason to live. This year would turn out to be much better than expected.

They rested for a while, both of them needing sleep but neither one finding it possible. Hermione was busy taking in everything. She always loved to overanalyze anything that happened and this was just a bit much for her. She had fallen for Draco and now he wound up being her worst enemy.

She didn't like being touched by any man. Every look a boy sent her made her think of HIM and she didn't like it but not with Draco. He had a calming effect on her. For some reason or another, he made her feel safe and comforted.

He sat there as well thinking about everything but he found it hard to think clearly when she smelled so good. He inhaled her scent...peaches. It was hypnotizing. She was intoxicating to him. Every whiff he got sent chills up and down his spine. He wanted so badly to have her but he knew he couldn't. Too many reasons for them NOT to be together but the only reason he would ever even think about was her. She was most likely not ready to be touched by

another man after what had happened to her. Another thought that ran through his head was the idea that she might not have been interested in him that way.

Though it seemed clear to him that he wanted her to be more than a friend, he wasn't sure what she was thinking. It was all too new and too confusing and so they just sat there with their thoughts.

Damion flew around the room hooting happily. Finally he would be able to stop flying back and forth around the countryside of Britain. He landed on the windowsill and watched the two new friends getting acquainted.

They talked for a few hours, trying to re-familiarize themselves with each other. They each knew their pen pals and they knew their old selves but this was different. THEY were different. The entire situation was different and everything was changed. And so they were busy re-acquainting themselves with their new friends.

They laughed for hours and hours, telling jokes and humorous stories. "When I was five, my mum used to bring me to this muggle fast food place called Kentucky Fried Chicken. I loved it," Hermione said, starting a new story. "And don't ask me how but I began choking on a pickle. Looking back on it I'm surprised because HE jumped up and saved me. He did the heimlich maneuver. I'll never forget that." She was smiling but her lips immediately dropped into a frown. "Why he would save my life only to ruin it later on is beyond me."

A few tears managed to slide down her cheek but she immediately brushed them away not wanting to have him see her crying but he grabbed her hands. "You don't have to brush the tears away. You can cry in front of me. It's okay...Hermione." Her name rolled off his tongue like it was nothing. He had never called her by her real name before, only last names were suitable for his enemy. But not now. Now she was Hermione and he didn't want it any other way. It seemed so natural to call her by that name.

"I...I...I just don't...I...Why?" she asked and he wasn't quite sure what she was questioning. Was she thinking about her stepfather or was she questioning Draco's new found kindness towards her?

He picked her up from the couch and walked up the stairs that led to her room. She shuttered at his every touch but she had no energy to tell him to leave her be let alone to walk up to her own room so she let him carry her. Pushing open the door, he took long strides to get to her bed. "Do you want to get changed?" he asked her with a look of worry on his face.

"No. I'll sleep in my clothes." He tucked her under the covers and turned to leave but her voice stopped him. "Good night..." He continued walking as he heard her whisper, "Draco."

Reaching his room, he took off his shirt and examined all his scars. They didn't seem so bad anymore. At least he was safe from his father most of the year through. And he had never been violated like she had been. 'Poor Hermione,' he thought with a frown. 'I wish I could rewind time and make sure she was never put in that situation to begin with. If I ever saw that man I would kill him!'

He went to the bathroom and showered off. As he was in the shower allowing the water to flow over his bare back, he heard a deafening scream coming from Hermione's room. Without a second thought, he got out, wrapped a towel around himself and ran to her side.

As he neared her bed, he saw her flailing around in fits, her hands waving violently in the air and her head swaying back and forth. She was screaming, "Get off of me! Please! I promise I'll behave! Just please don't!" Her legs were wriggling as if there was someone on top of her but there was no one there. The room was empty save from Draco and Hermione. He got a little closer to her and managed to push her arms down on the bed to restrain her.

"Hermione, it's me, Draco. Wake up," he commanded in a soft tone. She was still screaming and trying to break out of his hold and he backed off, knowing that if she awoke to find herself pinned it would scare her even more.

He continued calling her to wake up and soon, she did. Her head shook in realization of what was going on. She bolted upright in bed clutching the blankets to her chest. "He...He...He was here! I...he..."

He sat next to her and stroked her head. "It was just a dream," he reassured her. "He can't hurt you here, sweetheart." It was uncommon for him to show so much affection to anyone but the names just kept coming out of his mouth before he could stop them.

He continued stroking her hair, enjoying the soft feel and noticing that she seemed to be assuaged by the gesture. She brought her knees up to her chest and began rocking back and forth with silent gratitude to Draco for waking her up. It was another one of her nightmares. She feared they'd come too often and she was glad Draco would be in the next room to wake her up when she needed.

He stood up and kissed her forehead. "I'll be off to sleep now," he said as he began to retreat back to his own room.

When she saw his back she stopped him by standing up and placing both her hands on his shoulders. "Don't go," she demanded. She brought him back over to her bed and made him sit down. She sat behind him, running her hands over the scars on his back. "He did this to you?" she asked even though she knew the answer.

He nodded his head, enjoying the warm sensation her touch brought to him. Her soft fingers ran over the deep gashes that Lucius had made and she wanted to take Draco in and make sure no one could ever hurt him again. She laid down on the bed and patted for him to lay next to her.

He followed her instructions, ready to give her anything she wanted, including if she wanted him to leave. As soon as he laid down, she rested her head where his neck met his shoulder and put one arm across his chest. "Time to sleep," she said while stifling a yawn. It was then that he realized all he was wearing was a towel but it appeared as though it didn't faze her at all and so he tightened it around his waist, making sure it couldn't come undone. Then he wrapped one arm around her, holding her tight.

"Hermione, I have a question," he said cautiously.

"What?" she responded with another yawn, falling asleep as she

spoke.

"Um...Well don't answer if you don't want but um...

"What is it, Draco?" she said with annoyance in her inflection. She was still falling asleep though and was hardly conscious that the conversation was even taking place.

Taking a deep breath in, Draco blurted out, "Who's your father?"

Her eyes stayed closed and she looked like she was asleep. Without ever realizing it, she responded, "Tom Riddle," right before she drifted off to sleep.

Waking up the next morning, Hermione allowed all of the events from the previous night to flood her thoughts. Knowing that she had let too much out, she sat up in bed feeling a massive headache. "Ugh..." she moaned as she sat up. "I don't feel so good."

She then noticed Draco's half naked form lying right next to her. He was in nothing but a towel and for a second, she questioned if they had done anything last night but then she remembered that he had just gotten out of the shower when he came to wake her from one of her nightmares. Nothing had happened and she wasn't sure if she was happy about that. She thought about him as more than a friend. She wouldn't mind if he ever wanted to go further. Of course, she would never admit that to him. It was too much to deal with.

Draco awoke with much of the same reaction. As soon as he noticed that he was only wearing a towel, he questioned whether or not he had taken advantage of his new friend. Replaying the night's events, he came upon the conclusion that he in fact did NOT do anything other than comfort her.

"Morning, sleepy," she yawned. "Time to face the rest of the world." Today was their first real day back at Hogwarts but they didn't have classes. Classes would begin the following day.

They both sat up and Draco left the room, going back to his own in order to get changed. When he was gone, Hermione got up and went to the bathroom. She turned on the hot water and stripped down out of her pajamas.

Gazing into the mirror, she examined her scars. There was one that began at her navel, running all the way up to her left breast. "Oh dear," she heard a voice say. She glanced around the room, looking for the culprit and found nothing there. "Who did that to you?" the voice spoke again. She looked up and saw the mirror had formed a face.

"OH!" Hermione exclaimed. "I didn't know who was speaking!"

"Sorry to give you a fright," the mirror said. "My name is Tilly. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Same here," she resonded. "My name is Hermione."

"Well hello, Hermione. If you don't mind me asking, what happened to your stomach?"

Hermione's face turned a crimson color, not prepared for such questions. "Um...well...I fell and scraped myself with a kitchen knife," she lied. "I'd love to stay and talk but I have to shower now. Got things to do before school begins tomorrow." She stepped into the shower and began washing her hair.

Draco sat in his room, after changing out of his towel and into some school robes, letting his thoughts run wild. He remembered the last words she had said to him before she fell asleep. Tom Riddle. Her father was Tom Riddle.

Waiting a little while after he heard her exiting the bathroom, he sat down and wrote another letter, not wanting to barge in on her while she was changing. "Damion, take this to her and come back." He gave his pet an owl snack and then watched him fly away.

Hermione wrapped the towel tightly around herself. As Damion flew in, she let a smile dawn upon her face. 'So we'll still be penpals?" she thought to herself, taking the note from Damion's claws.

Dear Hermione,

I want to talk to you. We have a lot to discuss. Would you like to spend the day with me? We could walk in to Hogsmeade, one of the many privileges of being Head Boy and Girl. We can go any time we want. So would you like to go today so we can talk and maybe get a drink at the Three Broomsticks?

Draco

She put the letter aside and began to comb her hair. In about a half hour, she was ready for the day. She wore a pair of denim jeans and

a black long sleeved turtle neck, covering up everything. It was chilly for some reason and she wanted to be warm.

She found him sitting on the couch. Apparently he had been waiting for her. "When you didn't respond," he said, "I figured it was a yes. So shall we be going then?"

She nodded and they began to walk to the magical town that still never ceased to amaze her. Growing up as a muggle, she had always dreamt of magical worlds and fairy tale heroes and now that she was all grown up, it turned out that her dreams had come true. Magic WAS real. It existed and it lived in her. She had magic.

Of course she would never use magic outside of school. It was the magical world policy. No child was allowed to use magic outside of school until they graduated. She had thought about it many a times during that summer, wanting nothing more than to hex him and run away, but she didn't like the sound of losing her mother and the privilege of using magic all at once.

Draco and Hermione entered the Three Broomsticks and ordered two butterbeers, searching for a table far away from everyone. Finding it in the corner, they walked over and Draco held out a chair for her.

She was shocked but didn't show it. She sat down and he pushed the chair in. 'Chivalry's not dead,' she thought with a small smile. As she took a sip of her warm and fizzy drink, she watched Draco watching her. It was as if they were both sizing the other one up.

He was examining every little move she made, the way she pushed her hair out of her face before she took a sip and the way she held the cup with two hands and allowed the liquid, as it slid down her throat, to warm her through and through. She examined him as well.

She watched as his eyes scanned the room, making sure no one was there that could hurt her. She saw him checking to make sure he had his wand in case there was any trouble. She thought these acts were protective measures, measures that she would expect from Harry and Ron, measures that she would expect only from those who truly loved her.

"Tom Riddle," he finally got out. "How much do you know about his history?"

Her eyes widened at the subject. She had been praying that they wouldn't have to discuss this but apparently she was wrong. "Only what I told you in my letters. He loved my mum and so did my stepfather. But it was Riddle who impregnated my mother and it was my stepdad who wound up marrying her."

"Want to know the rest of the story?" Taking another sip of his butterbeer, he watched the effects of his two questions. It was as if he wasn't just questioning her heritage but questioning her entire existence. After a few moments of mulling it over, she shook her head fiercely, wanting to know the whole story.

"Ok, well it starts when they were in school. It all revolves around three people: Tom Riddle, some kid Riley and a girl, Helen Andrews, who happened to be many years younger than the other two. Tom Riddle, as we all know, was a Slytherin, a bright promising young wizard destined to go places. Helen Andrews was actually a Gryffindor, beautiful young woman, well sought after by the entire male population of Hogwarts, and incredibly intelligent. Her favorite pastime was reading. From what my father told me, she was a lot like you. Riley was a shy Ravenclaw, a quiet scholar, didn't have many friends and secretly he was a huge mischief maker. That's how he became friends with Tom. They were two devils but it was their secret. No one ever knew about their pranks.

Anyway, one day, years after graduation, Tom was walking down the streets of Hogsmeade heading towards the Hogs Head where he was to meet up with Riley. He wasn't looking where he was going and then he ran into her. Helen Andrews. They started talking and so he brought her with him to meet with Riley.

Soon, they were spending time together every day and became the best of friends. But the problem with all friendships containing members of the opposite sex is that eventually one, if not all, of them develop feelings for someone. And so it is that Riley fell for their female counterpart. Tom also fell, but his feelings were actually

returned. Helen was head over heels for the bloke and poor Riley was left out the moment the two started dating after two years of friendship. Helen and Tom became inseparable. They fell in love. They kept their difference of opinions to themselves. He hated muggles, she believed in equal rights. Since their opinions were so different, they just never discussed it.

Riley learned to push aside his feelings for Helen a few months later and so they were able to still be great friends. But there were many obstacles for Helen and Tom to overcome. Tom was stubborn and very jealous. He never liked it when she spent time with just Riley. He didn't like it when she spent any time with any other man. But he really despised her seeing Riley so much. He thought that they were too close for his comfort and so he constantly bickered with her over it.

It was after five years of dating that things got even worse. One day, Riley and Helen were doing their Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley. They were in the pet shop when Riley couldn't take it any longer and so he leaned in and kissed her. Of course it wasn't a kiss that she returned but from where Tom was standing, behind one of the larger cages, it appeared as much more than it was. He automatically flipped out. A few weeks later, she announced that she was pregnant and Tom jumped to conclusions. He asked her to abort, thinking it was Riley's. When she said no, he became violent.

Riley convinced her that he was a threat to all of their lives and persuaded her into running away with him and getting married so that the child was not a bastard child. She took his last name and they went in to hiding. Tom searched high and low for the two but couldn't find them and so he gave up. Months later, he received a letter from her saying that she had taken his advice on getting the abortion, not wanting to have a lasting reminder of him for the rest of her life. He never thought about her again, believing the relationship was over and finding no reason to torture himself with dreams of her. He loved her so much and the thought of her being with someone else would have destroyed him. He figured that she was gone and gave up all hope on ever being with her again.

That's the extent of what I heard. My father never told me Riley's last

name because it was unbeknownst even to him. You see, Riley was such a shy guy that no one even knew he existed. He kept to himself.

After all was said and done, Tom became Voldemort and one day entrusted my father with the details of the story, which is why I know the story. But Lucius didn't know the minor details, the small things, like Riley's last name so that's why I didn't make the connection all these years. I believe your stepfather may have been lying to you about certain things that I heard you mention in your letters, but that's basically the story I heard. Hermione, what happened to your mother?"

She looked up at him with a puzzled sort of worried look. "Huh?"

"In all your letters, you always said she was...gone. You never said if she had passed on or if she had left. I was wondering what happened."

Hermione stared straight past him, seeing a sight that made her shirk. There he stood, gazing right at her. His black robes billowing behind him as he approached her. His hood covered his face but she knew it was him. He had finally come for her just as she knew he would. "I think we'll have to finish this discussion later," she said with a gulp, trying to put on a face of bravery though it seemed quite impossible for her to do. Nervousness crept through her as he came closer and closer.

Draco turned in his seat to see who she was talking about and saw a man drawing near. Behind him, a woman followed. She was tall with short brown hair. It was covered by the hood of her robes which she seemed content in wearing. Hermione just kept that face of bravery on but under the table, Draco could see her hands shaking.

"Hermione," the man said in a deep hissing voice. Draco stood up and walked behind his new friend, placing his hands on her shoulders to let her know that he was right behind her, whatever happened. "Your mother and I have come for you. Let's go to the Hog's Head and have a little family discussion."

Hermione's eyes widened as she saw the woman step out from

behind him. She took off her hood and Hermione could see the bags that had begun to form beneath her mother's hazel eyes. Her smile seemed fake. Helen had always had a big smile, one that made everyone else around her feel warm and fuzzy all over. But not now. Now, she looked cold, worn out, tired...deathly.

"Hermione, listen to your father," Helen reprimanded, noticing her daughter's lack of movement. "Say goodbye to this kind gentlemen," referring to Draco, "And let's go!"

Hermione unconsciously brought herself to her feet and rose, turning around to face Draco. "I...I...I have to g...go...now. I'll...I'll see you back at...at school." He could have sworn he heard her mumble, "I hope," under her breath as her parents led her away.

Feeling stupid and useless, he jumped up and ran after the cute little family. "WAIT!" he screamed, chasing them down the road. "I'm not letting her go anywhere," he said while trying to catch his breath after finally catching up to them. "We have Head Student duties to attend to."

Hermione's lips curled up into a smile. "It's okay, Draco. We can work them out later. This is my DAD...not...not who you're thinking about."

Helen turned to the platinum blonde haired boy and smiled. "You must be a very good friend of my daughter's, running after her and trying to protect her from wizards with triple the amount of power you have. Tell me, boy. If we had been...dare I say abusing my daughter, what would you have done?"

He let out a chuckle. "I was planning on using the Petrificus Totalus on you both and rushing her back to Hogwarts."

The three laughed but he seemed to find no amusement in Draco's response. "You are a very foolish boy, thinking you could take me on," he hissed. "Judging by your silver hair and your cold gray eyes I can tell your Lucius' son so I won't hold it against you... but DON'T make that mistake again! I could crush you, boy!"

Hermione looked up at him with water in her eyes. "I can't believe

you're threatening the one friend I thought you would approve of!" she screamed while running off in the opposite direction. Helen chased after her, leaving Draco alone with his father's boss.

"So..." Draco said while rocking back and forth in order to entertain himself. "It's really great to meet you, sir. I've heard a lot about you."

"Stop trying to suck up," the old man shrieked. "You like my daughter, I can tell. Heed my warning, son. If you ever hurt her, I swear to the Gods that I will make sure that you suffer until your very last breath!"

Hermione sat in a darkened corner of Knockturn Alley feeling almost at home. And why shouldn't she? Her father was one of the darkest wizards to ever live.

Her tears streamed down her face as her mother approached. "Hermione, dear," she said. "Why are you crying? I don't understand?"

The young girl looked up into her mothers eyes as she reached her arms around her, clinging to her like a little child would. "I've missed you so much mum!" she cried out, sobbing into her shoulder. "So much has happened and I just...I wanted so badly to crawl up on the couch with you and cry, to tell you all my problems but I couldn't 'cause you were gone! Why did you go? Why did you leave me with that...that...that horrid man!"

Helen pushed her daughter back slightly and looked at her tear stained face. "It's not that simple, sweetheart! You think I WANTED to leave you?"

They had no more time to talk for already Voldemort and Draco were coming forward. "Hermione? Are you okay?" Draco asked, running to her side and holding her in his arms as she cried against him. "Sh...it's okay. I'm here. Relax. Take three deep breaths." She inhaled deeply. "That a girl. Now let's wipe your tears away and put on that Granger smile that I used to despise." The corners of her lips rose up high and after a moment, she stuck her tongue up, blowing a raspberry his way. "That's it! Perfect! I knew it was there somewhere," he said sarcastically.

Hermione hit Draco playfully on the arm and turned to her parents. "I'm better," she choked out.

"Good," Voldemort said. "Now let's go have that talk!"

They walked to the Hog's Head and took their seats at a booth in the corner, making sure no one was around that could hear them.

"What do we have to talk about?" Hermione finally asked Voldemort, wanting to get it over with. "I think that everything is pretty self explanatory. You both left me alone so you could be responsibility free. Understandable. So now that we've "talked", can I go? I do not desire to be seen at the same table with the Dark Lord."

"Hermione," her mother said with annoyance clear in her voice. "That is no way to talk to your father! Now apologize!"

"I will not apologize to the man that I have been fighting against ever since my first year at Hogwarts! He attacks my best mates, threatens my new ones...I have no reason to apologize!"

"Enough!" Voldemort hollered. "I am your father regardless! You will show me respect! And even if I wasn't your father, respect would be expected just considering who I am!"

"Who you are? You think you should be respected because of your name? Well I've got news for you, FATHER! Your name is the very thing that makes me HATE YOU!"

"All daughters hate their fathers at one point or another. Your hatred is to be expected after everything that has happened but right now I'd like to discuss what you were whining about to your mother about earlier in the alley."

"That's what I wanted to discuss," Helen cut in. "You seemed to be unhappy staying with Riley this summer. Why? All he's ever been to you is kind. He's loved you like his own daughter! Riley has kept us fed and sheltered for over sixteen years! I know your father doesn't like him but he has his reasons! Now would you kindly explain yours?"

Hermione seemed to be petrified at the topic of conversation and so she just sat there biting her nails. After a few minutes of silences, Draco decided to speak up for her. "That man was certainly not kind as you put it, Mrs. Granger."

"Andrews, young man. Ms. Andrews. I sent the divorce papers ages ago! But I'd much prefer you call me Helen!"

"Sorry...Helen. What I was trying to say though was that the man that you allowed Hermione to stay with all alone this summer was not as kind as you thought. Make her roll up her sleeves and take off the concealment charms! Then you'll see what I mean!"

Helen gasped at the news that she had just heard coming from the boy sitting across from her. "Hermione, what is he talking about?" she asked.

Hermione glared at Draco with malice in her eyes. "I thought you said you wouldn't tell anyone!" she whispered through gritted teeth.

"She's your mother. She should know!"

"But I don't want to tell her!"

"Then I will! One way or the other, she's got to know!"

"She left me with him, Draco! She has no right to know!"

"EXCUSE ME!" Helen raged. "I'm still right here! Would one of you PLEASE explain to me what the bloody hell is going on?"

Hermione cautiously rolled up her sleeves one by one exposing her unmarked skin. Draco then took out his wand and said a spell allowing the bruises to come forth. Helen's hands instinctively flew up to her mouth, trying to hide her gasp of shock. "Oh my word!" she cried out. "And you say that Riley did this to you?" Hermione nodded her head.

"And worse," Draco let out, feeling it his duty to inform his loves mother of just what went on without her there.

"What do you mean by worse, Mr. Malfoy?"

"You can call me Draco and what I mean is that he didn't just beat her from what she told me in the letters we passed back and forth. She was cut off from any form of contact with anyone. He never knew about our letters though. We wrote almost daily, unless she was beat

too badly. But all the mail that came for her from the school, from her other friends, the mail that came through the mail slot, it never got to her...and the phone calls...Well I remember one letter she wrote that told me that her dear old friend Potter gave her a buzz and the punishment was...well...undeniably painful, enough to make sure she was too weak to pick up a quill for over a week!"

"That's enough, Draco," Hermione said with in an angry voice. "Just shut it now! I think they get the point." She didn't want to tell them anymore then that. She didn't want to admit what had really happened that summer. She didn't want to tell them how she had been degraded day after day. She didn't want them to know the abuse her body had gone through. She just wanted to forget it ever happened.

Helen was near tears at the sight of Hermione's arms. She didn't need to know anymore to know that leaving Hermione alone with the man had been a huge mistake.

"Why did you leave me with him?" Hermione finally asked. "How could you just abandon me?"

"Hermione, calm down. It was only one summer!" Helen yelled in defense.

"One summer? That's what you think it was? One summer? Look at my arms, mother! It only took one summer! The truth is...it only takes one day, one minute to ruin a persons life! I had a whole summer of those days and those minutes! A whole summer of my minutes feeling like hours! A whole summer of my days feeling like years! A whole summer of hell! And I owe it all to you for screwing up my life!"

Helen then took the opportunity to use Hermione's hatred for her true father to take some of the heat off herself. "Would you have preferred growing up with the Dark Lord as your father?"

Hermione became stumped and opened her mouth to say something but then shut it again, knowing that anything she was going to say would be contradicting everything she had ever believed.

"I thought so!" Helen exclaimed in triumph. "Now, Tom, Hermione and I are going to go do some girl things. I'll take her shopping and we'll go out to lunch. While we're out, why don't you buy dear Draco here a drink?"

Hermione could have sworn that she heard a grunt coming from him at the suggestion but he didn't say anything. Instead, he kissed Helen on the hand and then turned to face his daughter. "I'm not kind, I'm not young, and I'm not the kind of man that a girl like you would idolize but I am your father, like it or not. And despite all the flaws you would seek to find in me, I do know how to love family and even if we are on different sides, I will hold to my beliefs...Blood is thicker than water. That means that you come before everything, including me killing Potter, but that doesn't mean you can go and get in the way of it happening."

Avoiding any further eye contact, Hermione stood up, gave Draco a nice little kiss on the cheek, mainly to annoy her 'father' but also because she wanted to, and walked out the door not daring to look back.

Draco watched the two girls walk away with his jaw dropped open. "From everything I heard from your father, Malfoy, I thought you hated my daughter," Voldemort said.

"Yes well...time changes everything! As you have already pointed out, I have grown quite fond of her. In fact, sir...I've come to love her."

"Does she know that you love her?"

The color red flashed across his cheeks as it dawned on him that he was actually confessing his love to the wrong person and it should have been Hermione that he was telling and NOT her father. "Actually, she doesn't sir."

"And why is that? Are you afraid, boy? Afraid she won't love you back? Afraid she'll turn you down? Afraid she loves Potter like I read in the Daily Prophet a few years back? Or are you afraid I won't approve?"

"I'm not afraid of any of those things sir. But I am afraid that she's not prepared for a relationship after the horrid summer that she's had. You see, I love her enough to know when to back off and right now all I think I should offer her is a friend that's always there for her."

"You sound like you're trying to impress me or trying to get on my good side. Stop. I don't want to hear that garbage. I want to hear about the real you. Your father beats you, correct?"

It took Draco a long while to respond. "Correct." But he wasn't expecting what the older man responded, though he probably should have been.

"Good. It'll make you stronger. I like strength. I approve of you liking my daughter."

"You APPROVE of me liking her? As if you really had a say! I don't even have a say! No one chooses who they fall for!" Draco had grown quite angry by that point, feeling as though the man across from him was out of line. "I'm sorry if I sound rude or disrespectful but it's just that...with Hermione...well everything is just so frustrating. You think I want to be in love with her? I hate her friends with a passion and the Gods know that I'm not mature enough to handle a real relationship but that didn't stop me from falling for her. For years and years we've been at each others throats but every time I'm around her my heart starts beating really fast and I feel the heat rising in my cheeks, which tells me one thing...I'm hopelessly in love!"

He stood from his seat and began pacing back and forth, trying to organize his thoughts. After a few moments, he sat back down and looked at the old man in front of him.

"Believe it or not, young Malfoy, I understand love. I understand how unpredictable it is. Though I understand love, I don't think you should let it affect you as much as you do. Love and emotions, they are weaknesses that can be used against you. I know your father told you much about me and so I know there is no need to tell you any more but listen to an old man's advice. Don't let a girl cloud your vision. I can see that you will be great if you stay strong. Next summer, you will receive the Dark Mark along with my daughter and then you will

both join my ranks and become two of the most prominent Death Eaters amongst us."

Out of nervousness, Draco forced a smile and thanked him for the supposed compliment. "Thanks sir. Do you want a drink now? I'll go order you a firewhiskey from the bar." Without waiting for an answer, he stood up and walked to the bar, desperate to get away.

Hermione and her mother walked down Diagon Alley in silence neither one wanting to say anything that would upset the other. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Helen decided to break the ice. "I'm sorry you had such a terrible summer. I really never thought Riley would react like that."

In silent anger, Hermione just snuffed and ignored the woman beside her. She walked into the pet store and began looking around. "Sweetheart," Helen said. "You don't have a pet. What are we doing in here?"

"I may not have a pet, mother, but Draco does and when he owls me, I need to have some food to feed Damion. That's his owl's name. He's really gorgeous, even prettier than Hedwig. And he's really sweet as well. Draco and I write letters back and forth all the time and Damion always shows up hooting and cheerful."

"Sounds like you really like that boy," Helen pointed out with a wry smile.

"I hardly even know him, mum. How can I like someone that I practically just met?"

"But you've known him for years, haven't you? Isn't he in your year at Hogwarts? Didn't you used to come home from school during the summers and incessantly whine about him? That at least implies that you knew him."

"Well you caught me there on a technicality. I did KNOW him but not in the sense that I knew anything about his family life and what he did outside of school. All I knew was that he didn't like Harry and Ron and of course myself. He was a true Slytherin. But I learned a lot more about him this summer through our letters. We talked about everything and I just love the way he can make me feel like there's something good in my life that I can really look forward to. I know that there's someone in this world that actually wants me around." Hermione paid for some yummy owl snacks and exited the store with Helen hot on her heels.

"Sweetheart, you know I want you around too. He's not the only one who wants you here."

Hermione stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk and faced her mum. "If what you just said was true then why did you leave? Why did you go? Why did you leave ME?"

"That's not how it went, Hermione. Gods do I wish that was how it went!"

"Then why don't you explain it to me?"

"Because...because...because you wouldn't understand!"

"What wouldn't I understand?"

"It's too complicated, sweetheart. We don't have time. Come. Let's go back to the Hog's Head and meet your father and Draco."

"NO! I'm not going back until you explain why you left me the bloody hell alone with that man!"

Reluctantly, Helen gave in to her daughters commands. "Fine. But let's go somewhere else to talk. I don't want anyone overhearing us."

They walked for a few minutes and finally reached a cute little café with seats on the sidewalk and so they sat down. No one was around really but they still spoke in hushed voices.

"I didn't want to leave," Helen finally admitted. "I loved Riley, maybe not in the way that a wife should love her husband but I DID love him. He and I were the best of friends."

"So what happened?"

"Well last autumn, right after you left for your sixth year at Hogwarts, he came for me. He found me at the house while Riley was out at work."

FLASHBACK

Helen sat in the bath tub, bubbles swarming around her. She had music playing in the other room, classical music. It was calming and she loved to have that mood while in the bath. As she reached her leg up to begin washing off her body, she heard a creak in the floor.

Worriedly, she stood up and wrapped herself in a bathrobe, not wanting to walk around naked. "Riley?" she called. "Is that you? What are you doing home from work so early? It's only four o'clock! I didn't expect you home for another hour or so."

She walked into the bedroom and searched around only to find there was no one there. With a sigh of relief, she headed back to finish her bath only to find it not possible. Someone was blocking the doorway.

"I've been waiting for almost sixteen years for this!" he snarled, grabbing her by the arms and flinging her to the wall.

"TOM!" she shouted in fright. "What on Earth are you doing here? I thought you were gone. The ministry said you were gone, that that boy had defeated you. I was under the impression that I would never hear from you again."

"I've never been one to give up easily! You should know that!"

"Why are you here, Tom?"

"I've finally come for you. You had to have known that I would some day. I've come to take you back with me. Pack your bag and let's go!"

She wrenched her arms away from his clutches and walked to the closet, picking out an outfit for the day. "I don't want to go, Tom. I'm happy here with Riley. We're a family and I don't want you anymore. Please just leave now before he gets home."

"I can't believe you married him! How could you be in love with me one day and then suddenly, the next day, you love him! How?"

"You and I are too different, Tom. We always were! You hated

muggles, I wanted us to live in a muggle community. You became the Dark Lord! What did you expect? That I would still love you even when you were killing innocent people? Even after you became something beyond human?"

"Love is blind to everything!"

"How could I love a murderer?"

She began changing in front of him, feeling rather uncomfortable but knowing that he would never leave her alone long enough for her to do it with privacy.

"I gave you the chance, Tom. I told you that I was pregnant! You turned me away! We could have started our own family but no! You asked me to get an abortion! You started killing people! I couldn't stick around and watch that!"

"But you will now! You have no choice."

"I won't go! You can't make me!"

"Oh but I can! IMPERIO!" After a few moments of watching the curse take its effect on Helen, Tom began to give her instructions. "Now you're going to pack your bags and you're going to come with me. You'll divorce Riley and become mine. You will never run away from me and you will stay at my side until the day I TRULY die! Is that understood?"

Though she didn't want to agree, she couldn't stop the word from coming out of her mouth, "Yes."

END

FLASHBACK

"And I've been under the curse ever since. He refreshes it from time to time but not today. Today I'm under my own free will. He thought it was necessary when seeing my daughter again. I don't comprehend the workings of his mind but that's far beyond the point. Darling, there's something you need to understand about all that I just told you. You see, once upon a time, I did truly love your father. And there's no

chance in hell I would have ever left him in the first place regardless of what he did if it wasn't for the fact that he sent me away. That man's greatest flaw, despite everything else, is his jealousy."

Helen took a sip of her cappuccino and looked at her daughters face. Horror was the first expression she saw but that soon changed to understanding. "But you would have let me grow up with him, let him raise me? You would have subjected me to a life of knowing that my father was a murderer? What if he had decided to kill people right in front of my very eyes? You would have let me live that kind of life?"

"It wasn't like that when I was with Tom. When I first met him, he was sweet. The only thing I ever saw wrong with him at first was the enormous age difference. But we never do choose the ones we love. I'm sure you've figured that out by now. Anyway, I told you what happened because I needed you to know that I didn't abandon you. I never would have left you. But after Tom put the Imperio on me, I waited at the house until Riley got home from work. I knew the only way he would let me leave is if I was cruel and I guess I was a little TOO cruel considering how he took it out on you. I told him that I never wanted him. He was just a security blanket that I had felt safe with. I said that he was never good enough for me and I didn't know why I had wasted my time on him for so many years. I told him that the only way he'd ever have been able to have me was if I was unconscious and he forced himself unto me."

"So that's it? That's why he became so..."

"Hermione, I need to know right now. Did Riley rape you?"

She dropped her ice latte at the mere question. "W...w...what? W...w...why...why would you ask that?" she asked as she began to clean up the mess that she had just made.

"Did he rape you, Hermione?"

"NO! He...he never...he never raped me! That's an...an absurd idea! Why would you ever think that he raped me?"

"Because your friend Draco said it was worse than just beatings and

the only thing worse than having a person you considered a father beating you senseless and telling you that you're the scum of the Earth is having the same man rape you."

"Well I don't know why you would ever come to a silly conclusion like that but the answer is no. He never raped me!" In Hermione's mind, she was falling apart. She knew she was lying and she also knew that she probably should have told her mother the truth but it scared her too much to ever confess it out loud.

"Thank goodness! I was so worried, dear. You know, you hear in the news or read in the papers about all these young girls that get violated in such a horrid manner and it scares the living daylights out of me, thinking that you could be one of them. The worst part is, a lot of young girls like yourself feel too humiliated to ever tell anyone so we have all the sexual predators out there on the loose all because the girls are embarrassed. And then, the girls just keep it all inside, all their emotions of fear and sadness and distress and no one can ever help them. I'm so glad that's not you."

"Can we please get back to the subject?"

"Sorry. What were we talking about again?"

"You being in love with the Dark Lord! I just don't get it. When he became Voldemort originally, why did you stay with him?"

"Isn't it obvious? Like he said to me when we first saw each other again, love truly is blind to everything, Hermione."

"Don't give me that! Even if you still loved him, you should've known to get out of there!"

"But if I had gotten out of there, Hermione, you would have never been conceived! If I had never loved the most evil man in the world, I would have never wound up giving birth to the greatest witch Hogwarts has ever seen."

"I don't care. I still can't believe it."

"What can't you believe?"

"Everything! I can't believe my dad is the Dark Lord! I can't believe you're actually a witch and not a muggle! I can't believe Riley's not my father but I'm thankful for it! And I can't believe that I just had the best and the worst summer of my life and..."

"Why was it the best AND the worst? I thought you had an awful summer."

"Well I did...except for the part where I got to get to know Draco. He's really sweet actually. And kind. And considerate. And handsome. And..."

"And..." Helen said with a little smile. "And you're in love with him."

"AM NOT!"

"Yes you are, sweetheart! It's written all over your face. Don't worry, it's only obvious to me. You're in love."

"No. I can't be. We're not even dating. We only just became friends. I can't love him. That's insane. That's blasphemy! Me? In love with Malfoy? I think living with the Dark Lord for so long now has really messed with your sense of humor because telling me that I'm in love with Malfoy is NOT funny!"

"I wasn't trying to be funny. You are in love with the boy! And I think your father approves of him so isn't that just great!"

"Why would I care if my 'father' approves? He hasn't been there for me for the last seventeen years. His opinion is irrelevant."

"Maybe to you it is but to him, well...let's just say this. If he didn't approve and you went ahead and dated the bloke anyway...you had better be prepared to start writing a eulogy for the poor guy."

"Well it really doesn't matter 'cause Draco and I are never going to go out. We're just friends and it's a wonder that we're even that."

"Is that how he feels? Is that all he feels towards you...friendship? That's not the impression I got."

"What? You think he likes me?" Inside Hermione's head, the wheels were turning faster and faster, processing every word her mother said. Was it true? Did she really love the man that tortured her for so many years? And did he feel the same?

"I think that if he didn't, he wouldn't be back there sucking up to your father right now. I think that if he wasn't head over heels for you, then he would've run back to Hogwarts at first glance of the Dark Lord. I think that if he wasn't in love with you, he would never have tried to protect you from a wizard with quadruple the amount of power as him! You may have always thought him to be a stupid git but trust me...he's smart enough to know a great catch when he's sees one and you, my dear, are a fabulous catch. You're beautiful and intelligent...a little emotional but you make up for it with your kindness and caring."

Hermione's face was blushing a bright red color and she began walking back towards Knockturn Alley. "Mum," she said as she rounded the corner. "Don't speak to Draco about me. I don't want you to go there and hint that he should be with me like you did the first day you met Harry and Ron. I'll find a boyfriend for myself. Don't get involved."

Helen grasped Hermione's hand tightly in hers. "Whatever you wish, my darling. I just want you to be happy."

When Helen and Hermione arrived back at the Hog's Head, they found the two men sitting around in silence. Apparently neither one really knew what to say.

"Hermione!" Draco exclaimed upon seeing his friend, happy to not be alone with the Dark Lord anymore. "I was wondering when you would get back. We should really be going back to school. It's late in the afternoon and dinner is in an hour."

"Right," she said in acknowledgement. "Well then...mother, it was good to finally see you again. I'll write as soon as I get a chance but that might not be that soon considering I'll be busy with Head Girl duties and all."

"Alright, well congratulations on the Head Girl thing and I hope you have fun this year! Try to make time to write a letter to me. I'd really love to hear from you."

"Okay, thanks. Bye."

"You're not going to say goodbye to your father?" Voldemort said in his calmest voice.

"I have absolutely nothing to say to you. I don't care what you say. You don't care about me at all. You just for whatever reason are in love with my mother. And maybe it's true that we share the same DNA but ask me if I care. You don't deserve me to say goodbye to you and I will not show you that kind of respect. Isn't it enough that I acknowledged your presence?"

Before he could respond, Hermione had grabbed Draco's hand and ran out the door, running as fast as possible back to the school. They didn't talk on the way back. The day had been too eventful for both of them.

As soon as they got back to the Head Tower, Hermione collapsed onto the couch in frustration.

"When did life become so bloody confusing?" she sighed into the pillow, allowing her hair to fall in front of her face, blocking her view of the rest of the room.

The room was hushed and a pin could have literally been heard dropping had anyone actually dropped it. Hermione buried her face further into the pillow to block out all of her racing thoughts. She could feel her head pounding and knew she was in deep need of rest.

After about a half hour, she looked up to see where Draco had gone off to, anxious to get to dinner. She found him heading up the stairs towards his room.

"Where are you going?" she asked him in worry. Maybe he had decided that she wasn't worth going through all that. Maybe he had realized that he was jumping through for her even though he didn't really like her.

When he turned to look at her, his smile was calming for her. "I'm going to get changed for dinner. The Hog's Head reeked of some of the most fowl stench my nose has ever dealt with and I want to get out of these smelly robes."

"Good idea," she replied. "I think I'll do the same."

The two went in their opposite directions and met up again in ten minutes in their common room.

"About today..." Hermione began.

"You don't have to say anything about it," he stopped her.

"But I do, Draco. I'm so sorry about today. I have no idea what he said to you but I apologize for anything my father did or may have said. He was..."

"NO! Don't apologize for your family. We can't be held responsible for what the members of our family do or say. I know that every encounter you've ever had with my father has been rather unpleasant

but I never once saw you complain. So guess what. I'm not going to complain. I won't lie, I don't like your father but for you, I'd sit with him as often as you'd like. I would have Sunday night dinners with him if you wanted. I would jump through hoops. Don't you get it, Hermione? I'm crazy about you! If it would mean that you would feel the same way, I would get the dark mark for you!"

In a wave of passion, he walked over to her and grabbed her in his arms. "I need you in my life so badly right now. If you ask me to, I will be just a friend to you. But I beg you...please don't ask that of me. I want you to be mine. I want to call you my own. Please can I call you my own?"

Hermione took her time to think about the question, feeling more awkward than ever. She questioned everything in her life that led to this point and discovered that the occurrence of Draco Malfoy asking her out was definitely the oddest thing to ever happen to her. IF he was even asking her out. Maybe she had misunderstood what he said. Maybe she was just hearing what she wanted to hear instead of what he was actually saying. Maybe he hadn't taken her in his arms and it was all just a big dream.

"Did you really just ask me out?" she asked him, not allowing a single emotion to show on her face. She didn't want to let him know how excited she was if it had just been a mix-up.

He let out a nervous laugh, responding, "Only if your answer is a yes. If not, I never said a word and this was all just a misunderstanding. But between you and me, I'm really hoping that the answer is a yes."

Now without any hesitation, she replied, "Yes. My answer is yes, Draco. I know it's weird and this happening was always a thought that never crossed my mind... but now it's happening and it's real and...and...and my answer is yes."

But of course, that's when she woke up. She still had a headache but it had died down slightly.

She lifted her head off the pillow and looked at the stairs only to find Draco walking towards her. "Hey, sleepy," he greeted her. "Rise and

shine...it's

dinner

time!"

She cracked a smile and stood up, fixing herself so she was decent to go to supper. "Okay. I'm up. Will you walk down with me?"

"Sure, why not? I never liked keeping secrets anyway. Let's go." He figured that as a Malfoy, people in the school had feared him for years. They'd be too afraid to start anything with him over a new friendship. And even if they didn't accept it, he didn't really care. Screw the world!

He took her hand and led her out the portrait hole, escorting her down to the Great Hall. When they reached the double doors, Hermione finally noticed that they were already fifteen minutes late and dinner had already begun.

"We're tardy. Everyone'll notice if we walk in together, Draco," she pointed out, making sure he knew what they were getting into.

"Your point? Listen, if you don't want people to know that we're friends, that's fine with me. I'm okay with it. But I don't want to hide our friendship so if it's alright by you, I'd like to walk you to your seat, make sure you're all set up and all that before I head off to eat dinner at my own table with all those dunderheads that somehow weaseled their way in to this school."

They both laughed and then she took his hand. "Okay then. I'm ready. We can go in now."

They pushed open the doors and walked in, earning the attention of the entire Hall. Just as Draco had said, he walked her to her seat between Harry and Ron and then he kissed her forehead and whispered, "See you later," into her ear.

As soon as he was gone, Ron nearly choked. "What - was - that!" he exclaimed, putting space between each word to emphasize his astonishment. "Why did you walk in with Malfoy? And why did he kiss you? And why aren't you horrified by the whole thing? And what was it that he whispered into your ear? And..."

"ENOUGH, RON!" she shouted in order to shut him up. "For your information, though it seems to me that it should be none of your business, Draco and I have become quite good friends over the summer. Please don't blow things out of proportion! It's not like I'm seeing him or anything."

"But Hermione...how could you!" Harry jumped in. "He's Malfoy! I thought we all hated him. I really don't have a problem with you making new friends and if you want to be friends with him then that's your choice, but I just don't understand. Malfoy has been nothing but awful to us for the past six years. I know you're a very forgiving person but some of the things he's done, well that's unforgivable!"

"Forgiveness is in me. I will not become a cold-hearted ice queen. I'm forgiving by nature! I can't change that. Besides, everyone deserves a second chance! EVERYONE!" She took a piece of chicken from the center of the table and began to eat.

Ron sat there in silence, awestruck by what he was hearing. "I can't believe you're so willing to forgive Malfoy after all he's done to you...to Harry...to ME! I...I can't believe you're just going to forget all of that!"

"I'm not forgetting, Ronald," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm simply forgiving. It's absurd to think that one can wipe out their entire memory of a person. Draco and I aren't starting over. We're simply opening up to one another, becoming friends. You should really try to get to know him. You'd be surprised at how kind he can be. I spent the day with him today. We went into Hogsmeade, had a drink at the three broomsticks, and we spoke for a while. It was nice spending time with him."

Harry took in a deep breath and responded before Ron could. "It's your choice, Hermione. I just want you to think about what you're getting in to before you go and fall in love with the bloke."

"I'm not going to fall in love with him, Harry. That'd be just too weird. Listen, can we just not talk about this anymore. The last thing I need right about now is you two hating me! I can't take it! Please just drop it for now! Please?"

Though Ron wanted to tell her how stupid he thought she was being and how much he thought Malfoy was a waste of oxygen, he refrained and instead just patted her shoulder. "Sorry, Hermione. Didn't mean to upset you. I just hope you know what you're getting yourself into but like you said, it's really not my business. You're a smart girl. You always tend to make the right decisions so I'll stay out of it."

"Thanks, Ron. I knew I could count on you two."

At the Slytherin table, Draco was getting a lot of grief for his new found kindness for the Gryffindor know-it-all but his only facial expression was a huge smile. "Listen...I don't care what all of you say! I don't need your approval to be friends with someone so just bugger off!"

Meanwhile, in a quaint little town in England, a drunken man sat in his brown leather recliner, drinking the night away. He picked up the Daily Prophet, which he had recently decided to subscribe to in order to keep up with whatever his ex-best friend and his former spouse were up to.

He stumbled to his feet and walked to the refrigerator, grabbing another beer from the top shelf. As he turned around, he saw something moving across the living room. "Who's there?" he called out in fake bravery. "Come out and show yourself."

"As you wish," a deep and threatening voice pronounced as they took a step out of the shadows.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"It's been a while, Riley," the man said, ignoring his old friends questions. "I hear you've been...busy!"

"TOM? Is that you? What are you doing here?"

"You know...in my life, I've seen a lot of odd things that may frighten other people but you know me, I've never been scared of anything."

But then I hear that I'm a father and my daughter is already turning seventeen and is living with a guy that I never really trusted."

"You didn't want the child! You told Helen to get an abortion so we decided that the best thing for everyone was to tell you that there was no child. I took them in and I took care of them when you wouldn't!"

Still ignoring him, the man continued. "After I heard she had actually kept the child, I was ready to run back here and pick her up but Helen protested, arguing that it would be too hard for her to see you again. Apparently, when she broke up with you, she was really rude. Anyway, I decided that my daughter would probably be safe but then. And she also said that Hermione wouldn't want to see me after all the years that had gone by...well Helen and I found her today and spoke with her. Turns out, her summer wasn't as fun filled as I had hoped. Actually, it was quite the opposite. You beat her. You abused her."

"You used to abuse Helen! I just learned from you," Riley spoke out with a smug grin. "And wasn't it always your belief that if it doesn't kill you, it only makes you stronger? Isn't that why you make sure that the dark mark hurts like hell?"

"You had no right, Riley! You scarred my daughter!"

"Mentally AND physically," he retorted with a chuckle, seemingly proud of himself.

"I find it hysterical how you can still laugh after what you did."

"Oh really? Well what about you? What about every time you kill another innocent muggle? I see you have no problem with that!"

"How dare you compare my daughter to a muggle! You'll pay for that, Riley!"

"You want to know something? I visited her just last night, at Hogwarts. I used that invisibility spell you taught me when we were still in seventh year. I was on her, IN her, touching her and feeling her writhing beneath me. I figured, if I can't have Helen, I can still have her daughter! I left a bit early due to the Head Boy coming in and

breaking up the fun but I'll go back and next time, I'll use a silencing charm to make sure he can't hear her scream."

"You are a very foolish man. You're smashed, aren't you? No matter. I'll kill you either way!"

In the Daily Prophet the next morn, the front page read:

VOLDEMORT STRIKES AGAIN: HEAD GIRL'S FATHER FOUND DEAD

A man by the name of Riley Granger was found dead last evening. He was said to be the father of the infamous Hermione Granger, muggle born and the best friend of Harry Potter.

Ministry officials believe that this could be the work of the Dark Lord, trying to unnerve Miss Granger who is known to be the brains behind all of Potter's operations. This girl is rumored to be the most intelligent witch ever to live let alone to ever attend Hogwarts. By the end of first year, she had already mastered many difficult spells and all of the easier ones.

It is no exaggeration to say that the entire Wizarding Community owes a great deal to this young woman. She has helped prevent the Dark Lord from returning time and time again, though no one could have stopped him from eventually coming back. He is said to be back to full strength again and gathering troops.

This attack on Mr. Granger was one of a series of murders, using the unforgivable curses as his weapon.

Everyone here at the Prophet sends our deepest condolences to this poor teenager (even Rita Skeeter). More on the story can be found in the Obituaries.

Hermione awoke to the first morning of school feeling better than she had all summer long. She was so excited for school to begin. Just thinking of all the new books she would be reading and all the interesting and challenging exams she'd be taking made her quake in anticipation. But that was what she loved, the anticipation aspect of it all. Nerves racking, palms sweaty...it was an adrenaline rush to her.

She ran into the common room and saw Draco seated on the couch, reading something that seemed to be interesting to him considering he didn't even notice her walking in.

"Morning," she said to him, sitting down in a chair close by. "Did you sleep well?" He looked up and she noticed for the first time that he was wearing glasses. "Do you always wear glasses when you read?"

He didn't seem to be hearing what she was saying at all. "So you didn't read the paper then?" he asked cautiously, not sure how she would be handling the news.

"What do you mean?"

"I think there's something you'd better read," he reported, handing her the Daily Prophet.

He leaned back and watched as she read through the paper, each word impacting her more and more. What was she feeling? What was she thinking? Draco had to know but didn't want to upset her.

"I...I...he's dead?" she asked, looking up at Draco. "I...I guess I never even thought of the possibility of it actually coming true. This is a huge shock."

"The thing is," he said to her, trying to make her know exactly what was happening. "If this isn't a sad thing for you, I'm happy because you really shouldn't cry over a piece of scum like that. But the whole school now knows that your "father" just died and they're going to expect you to be crying and moping and all that good stuff. You have two options. One, lie and pretend to be utterly devastated. Or two, tell

the whole school the truth."

Feeling a wave of nausea, Hermione ran up to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. She had no breakfast to lose, but it came up anyway.

While Hermione was having her anxiety attack, Draco heard a knock on the door and went to answer it. It was the Headmaster.

"Good day, Mr. Malfoy. It's good to see you again. I trust the Head Tower and your living conditions are to your liking?"

"Eh...there's still no place like home, even if the place is a palace." School may have been a safe haven for him but no one needed to know that. "But this will suffice." Yes, leave it to Draco Malfoy to put down the nicest Tower in the entire school.

"Well I'm just here for Ms. Granger. I assume she read the paper. Am I correct?"

"Yes sir."

"And what did she do after words?"

"Ran right up to the bathroom and locked herself in, that's what she did. She made herself sick over this. I think she's blaming herself for her father's death." He took the liberty of making the choice for Hermione. She would be pretending to be sad all throughout the day.

"Well I don't want to disturb her from her depressed state right now so I'm going to go on and go. I was just checking up on her. On any other day, I would allow her to take the day off from school but this is the first day back and it is crucial. I trust that when she gets out of the bathroom, you will escort her to your first class?"

"You want me to be her bodyguard?"

"In so many words...yes. Would you mind terribly?"

"I guess it's not as bad as being alone. All right then. I'll take care of

her."

Dumbledore left the room with his ever knowing smile spread wide across his face. Five minutes later, Hermione burst out of the bathroom looking paler than ever.

"You okay?" Draco asked.

"I...I just...I didn't want him to die!" she exclaimed resolutely. "I mean, I know he was a bad person and everything but...I didn't want him to die! I wanted to talk to him, I wanted to tell him how much I despised him, and I wanted to make sure he knew that I wasn't going to let him ruin my life!" She broke down, falling to her knees as her hands flew up to cover her face.

Draco, never being the type of person to comfort others, was clueless as to what to do. He squatted down and patted her back. "Don't cry, Hermione. It's okay. I don't think you needed to actually speak with him in order to make sure he knew you weren't too affected by him. I think that, wherever he is right now, he can watch you and see that you're okay. But at the moment, with you crying, all he's going to see is how affected you are. You've got to be strong!"

Okay, so he wasn't too good at this but hey, it was his first time! And he really WAS trying.

And though his advice wasn't very comforting, it was exactly what Hermione needed. "You're right," she responded as she wiped the salty tears from her cheeks. "He's not worth my tears."

"That's the spirit," he said. "Now listen, we're going to walk down to class together and I'll be escorting you to all your classes, even the ones you don't have with me. Right now your face is splotchy and red from the crying but that's a good thing. We need that. People will think you were crying over his death. It'll work out nicely. Try not to get excited today. Keep a straight face, maybe even try to look sad or depressed. Mope around, walk slowly, keep your head down, looking at the ground as if you're thinking really hard and nothing quite matters anymore. Think you can handle it?"

"I think so."

"You ready to go then?"

"Ready, Freddy!"

"Who the bloody hell is Freddy?"

"Muggle expression...never mind. Let's go."

She grabbed his hand and led him out of the room, both grabbing their books on the way out. They walked all the way down to the dungeons, Potions being their first class. He walked her to her seat, still holding her hand, and she sat down. Then he lingered near her until he saw the professor with greasy jet black hair walk in. Then, he took his usual seat in the back, keeping his eyes on her the whole while. By then, all of the students in either house had begun to gossip but neither of the pair listened to what they had to say.

"Hermione?" Ron said. "Are you okay?"

"Okay? Me? Why wouldn't I be okay?" she said all too quickly. "I mean, it's not like my family crisis has been brought up in the newspaper and it's not like the whole school is watching me, seeing what I'll do next! So why wouldn't I be fine?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other with sympathy for their female friend. "I'm here for you if you want to talk, Hermione," Harry finally said. "Anytime."

"Yeah, me too!" Ron added. "We're here for you, 'Mione."

"Will you three PLEASE shut up!" Snape snapped. "I'm trying to begin my lesson here and it's just a wee bit hard with you three chattering on and on as if you're only here to socialize!" As soon as he was sure that he had the attention of the whole class, he began. "Today we're learning about veritaserum. No we will not make the full strength veritaserum but we WILL make a slightly weaker form. Now can anyone tell me what this potion does?"

For once in her life, Hermione's hand did NOT shoot up immediately. Quite the contrary actually. Instead, she buried her head in her notes, pretending to look busy. That was what most students did if they did not want to be called on.

Snape, being the cruel man the he was, decided to pick on her. "Fine then. Ms. Granger, please tell us what this potion is."

Her head snapped up and she looked him right in the eyes.

"Do you not know?" he asked coldly. "I understand that there has been a death in your family but that is no excuse to come to class unprep..."

"Veritaserum is a very strong truth serum. We studied it a few years ago," she finally let out in a huffy tone.

"Good. Yes, you are correct, we did do this a few years ago but this is Advanced Placement Potions and the one we will be making today will be slightly stronger than the one you made previously."

"What will make this one different from the one we made already?" Draco asked.

"Good question, Mr. Malfoy. This one gets double the ingredients and has stronger effects. It lasts for twenty minutes and during that time, whomever drank it will tell any information asked lest it be life threatening. That is the difference between this and the real veritaserum. The real veritaserum requires the person who drinks it to give all information out, regardless of whom it may harm."

After about twenty minutes more of lecturing, he began to set them in groups. "I'll be pairing you up now. When I call your names, get with your partner and then get your ingredients. I want this done and tested by the end of class which is giving you plenty of time considering we have DOUBLE potions today. Now...let's see...I want Potter and Malfoy. Weasley and Nott. Thomas and Crabbe. Finnegan and Goyle. Brown and Parkinson. Patil and Bulstrode. Granger and Zambini..."

Hermione rolled her eyes, never having ever spoken to the man that was supposed to be her partner. She looked to Draco, her eyes asking him if she was going to be okay but his eyes provided her with little comfort.

She took her seat next to Blaise Zabini, who had been left back during their sixth year for failing Care of Magical Creatures, and began getting together the ingredients.

The preparing of the potion went well and of course, Hermione did it perfectly with little help from her Slytherin partner. As soon as Snape noticed all the students were through with their potions, he moved on to testing it. "Granger and Zabini, you're up first."

They moseyed their way up to the front of the class and Blaise pushed the vile into Hermione's hands. "You test it and I'll observe," he said.

Rolling her eyes, she took one large gulp of the fowl potion. "Good," Snape said. "Now class, you may feel free to ask her questions one at a time. Raise your hand and I will call on you."

Many hands flew up, which wasn't completely unexpected. Hermione was a quiet person. She only opened up to her closest friends so therefore not too many people knew that much about her. "Ms. Brown, you may ask one question."

"Hermione, why do you never wear makeup?"

"Because it makes no difference to me. I have no one to impress. People should like me for who I am, not what I look like. I want guys to know that what they see is what they get. I hate superficiality. It's so...fake."

"Mr. Finnegan."

"Hermione, why did you turn me down last year when I asked you out?"

"Because I didn't want a relationship. School is a lot of pressure and

I'm always striving to do well. I didn't want to add more stress to my already stressful life."

"Mr. Crabbe."

"Do you have food with you by any chance?"

"No."

"Mr. Zambini."

"What's going on between you and Malfoy?"

"BLAISE!" Draco roared. "If you want to know the answer to that, you should ask ME!"

"Well I'm asking Granger. So what's the answer Granger?"

"Draco and I are really close friends. Up until this summer, he and I were enemies but then, this summer holiday, we became pen pals. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Do you have a crush on him?"

"I don't form crushes. Crushes are silly and irrational. They're based purely on hormones and I've learned well to differentiate the feelings of lust and love."

"Do you at least lust for me?" Draco asked, now curious as to what she meant by her complicated answer. Why did women never answer straight out?

"I find you oddly attractive and yes, I feel things for you, but I have yet to put a finger on what it is that I feel."

Draco then felt sad that he had tricked her into telling him. He didn't mean to but unfortunately, that was the way it happened.

"That's enough," Snape declared. "Next victim...Potter and Malfoy. But I reserve the right to interrupt the interrogation!" Of course.

Malfoy was Snape's favorite student. It was as to be expected.

"Alright then," Draco said to Harry. "Do you want to drink it or shall I?"

"I have nothing to hide so I'll do it then."

"Fine by me."

Harry took a long swig of the potion and nearly gagged. It didn't taste so good. "I'm ready," he said soon, making sure they knew he had nothing to hide.

"I have a question!" screamed one of the Gryffindor girls that Harry had never really spoken with. "Are you...single?"

"The answer is unbeknownst, even to me. I met a girl over the summer that lived on my block and we had a relationship based on sex. We never stated whether or not we were going out or not so that is one question I cannot answer fully. But if you ask me, no, I am not single."

"Did you practice for Quidditch?" Ron asked hopefully, desperate for a yes. He was so hoping to win this year and everyone keeping in shape would be a big plus.

"Yes. I made sure to work out for an hour or so daily and I worked on my eye training."

"Any hints of the Dark Lord attacking or anything like that?" someone screamed in a state of terror.

"My scar burned a lot this summer."

"And...?"

"Any more is not required because it could harm others," Snape said as he stepped in. "We shall not discuss He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in my class. This is potions. Let's keep it at potions."

Class ended with that and everyone ran out of class as soon as

possible. Draco waited around for Hermione and decided to carry her books for her. "You fancy me, don't you," he asked though he knew the answer already.

"You fancy me as well. You may have never said it but I can see it in your eyes. Why do you fancy me though? That is the question."

He had no clue that she knew but apparently, he had been caught. "I guess it's your personality. I can relate to you. I..."

"I don't want to hear it! Let's get to class!"

Weeks passed by and Hermione and Draco's friendship continued to progress. Their feelings for one another grew more and more by the hour and the situation got more awkward for them with each new day.

Hermione received letters from her parents once a week just to check up on her. As Halloween approached, she could feel herself growing anxious. She felt very uneasy, as if something could happen at any moment. Draco told her she was being silly but she could feel in the pit of her stomach that something was going to happen, good or bad, she wasn't quite sure.

On All Hallows Eve, Hermione and Draco sat in their common room putting finishing touches on the Halloween feast. It was going to be slightly different this year. The theme they had chosen was House Unity. The students would not be sitting according to houses.

The idea was that essentially everyone was to show up in a costume with a mask and when they walked in, they would place their name in a black cauldron. As soon as everyone had arrived, the cauldron would begin splitting everyone up into two groups: boys and girls. Then the cauldron would match everyone with a member of the opposite sex according to compatibility. Then, it would put each couple at tables of eight. The center of the Hall was cleared out and turned into a dance floor and they had booked a muggle DJ to add a different feel to the evening.

Yes, they had gone all out for this. Draco had actually done most of the planning. He wanted to allow Hermione to just relax and have fun...have fun with him. A night that would allow her to rest, forget all her worries. Halloween would be that night.

"You still haven't told me your costume, Miss Granger," Draco mentioned as he continued to write down the names of all the students on small pieces of paper. The students were to find their names on a table outside the Great Hall and then throw the paper into the Cauldron. It was neat and organized, just the way Hermione liked it.

"I know! I want to see if you can figure out who I am. You're going to have to try to find me in the massive hordes of people!"

It might not be that hard. We MIGHT be partnered up together. I happen to believe we'd be very compatible."

"Not this again, Draco..."

"Of course this again! Come on! I don't get it. I fancy you. You fancy me. What's preventing you from just giving in?"

Over the past weeks, several times had Draco asked her out and every time, she said no but gave no explanation to her response.

"We have a ball to prepare for, Draco. Let's not get distracted here!" She continued checking off her party check list making sure everything would be perfect.

"Fine. Have it your way." He reached over and kissed her cheek , showing that there were no hard feelings. In the next second, he stood up and left to go get ready for the ball.

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Up in her room, she sat in the center of her bed with silent tears falling down her face. She was unhappy with herself. Draco had asked her out countless times and she had found countless reasons to say no but every time, they just kept becoming more and more ridiculous. I'm not ready for a relationship...too many responsibilities as it is...he's almost as emotionally unstable as I am...He's a Malfoy...he's been known to be a womanizer...we're better as friends...I don't date blonds...

But none of these reasons could take away the fact that she was falling for him. The more time she spent with him, the deeper she fell. He wasn't the kind to baby her. He didn't treat her like glass as if at any moment she could shatter. There was no sympathy in his actions. He treated her as he would anyone, but with a little more respect.

She could see it in his eyes. He respected her and he empathized

with her. They had gone through traumatic experiences. It was only fitting that they empathize with each other.

She used him as her rock. They went to school and when they came back, she would vent out all her frustrations. It was helpful because she would tell him her problems and he would tell her that she was being stupid. "Petty problems," he would call it. "You've been through worse. Stop whining."

She knew he didn't mean it rudely. It was his way of saying, "Keep your head up. You'll be all right." He just wasn't good at being sympathetic.

But it helped her. When she got frustrated because Snape ignored her raised hand, she'd take a look at one of the many different scars on her body and think, Compared to HIM, Snape looks to be as kind as Dumbledore.

Pushing her thoughts aside, she hurriedly got dressed in her costume. The white cloth went over her figure easily, looking almost like a toga. Then she took golden rope and tied it in a beautiful pattern around her entire midsection.

With a simple spell said, her long brown hair became even longer and fell in lovely gorgeous curls. She put on a golden crown and natural colored makeup.

Ah...Aphrodite...Goddess of Love

She made sure to put on a string of pearls around her neck and a pair of simplistic sandals. Draco will go crazy for this! Though she wasn't sure that that was what she so desired, she continued making herself look perfect until she was sure she was done. Then, she went down to the ball.
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As names were spit out of the cauldron, everyone listened carefully for their names and the names of their friends. Many couples were to be expected and it wound up being that hardly any Slytherin and Gryffindors sat together.

The other houses were all mixed evenly, which made Hermione jump for joy. She watched Harry and Ron get paired up with a couple of really sweet girls, one from Hufflepuff and the other from Ravenclaw. And they were also seated at the same table as each other. Ron seemed to be ecstatic with his date but the look on Harry's face told her he wouldn't be enjoying himself much that evening.

Harry and Ron had come as Batman and Robin. They wanted to make fun of the fact that everyone always called Ron Harry's sidekick.

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The cauldron spat out two names at a time and would stop after eight names had been spat out. That was how the tables were organized. Draco sat wringing his hands together, hoping to be put with SOMEONE he liked. He knew it was highly unlikely considering the cauldron had yet to couple a Slytherin and Gryffindor together.

Almost everyone had received a seating arrangement except for the last either people. The next two names spat out were Geena Thompson and Ralph Arden: Slytherins. Next were Blaise Zabini and Pansy Parkinson...Slytherins. Adamn Johnson and Alina Miles were next and they too were Slytherins. It was obvious that Slytherins were most compatible with themselves.

This left Hermione and Draco. She looked at him and smiled. He had come as a Greek warrior, his helmet covering his face for the most part. He looked brave and handsome. Oh yes, he did look good. She wished so badly that she could take off his helmet and run her hands through his soft blond locks but she resisted her temptaion.

She followed him to their table and whispered softly, "I thought the cauldron would mix it up better," as she sat down next to her date.

"It mixed it up to the best of its ability. It's hard to find a Slytherin and a Gryffindor with common interests. By the way, I love your costume. You look absolutely smashing." He picked up her hands and brought it up to his lips.

"Don't make fun, Draco. I like my costume. I happen to believe that this is a wonderful idea for a costume and I don't care what you say." She hate when he used sarcasm but something told her he wasn't joking this time.

"Let's get the introductions going, shall we?" he said after staring at her beauty for a few moments and finally deciding to change the subject. "Guy," he said, addressing the whole table. "This is Hermione, the head girl."

They all looked slightly upset that a Gryffindor was ruining their perfect table but they knew that if Draco accepted her, so should they.

A girl with long blonde hair approached Hermione timidly. "Hi. I'm Geena," she announced, seeming much like a first year. "And this is Ralph...my boyfriend."

"They're in love," Draco interrupted, pretending to be completely and utterly disgusted. "I guess the cauldron knew what is was doing."

"Hi, Hermione! I'm Alina," another girl said. She was tall and had short black hair and her eyes shone a bright green color. A Slytherin through and through. "This is my 'date' for the evening," she said while rolling her eyes. "His name is Adam but he's insignificant. Pay no attention to him."

"HEY!" Adam shouted as they got into an argument, bickering with one another, shooting insults back and forth.

"Fight like cats and dogs, these two do," Draco explained. "They've never gotten along since...well they went out in third year but he cheated on her with our dear sweet Pansy Parkinson, who happens to be one of my friends for whatever reason, and so Alina dumped him and since then, not a single kind word has been exchanged but we all know that they're in love. It's obvious the way they fight so much. I've always believed that it's a fine line between love and hate. They remind me a lot of us..."

"Hermione, oh my goodness! Your hair is so wonderful! Did you do it yourself? The ball is so lovely. The cauldron set me up with Neville

and I'm at a table with Ron and Harry!" Ginny Weasley barged in on Draco's moment and he was fuming.

"Excuse me, little miss I'm-a-Gryffindor-Pureblood-yet-I-have-no-money-to-even-buy-a-decent-Halloween-costume, can't you see that Hermione and I were in the middle of a conversation?" Hermione shot him a look that almost made him feel remorseful...almost. Really he was just so damn angry.

"Stop being a wanker, Malfoy," Ginny retaliated. "Are you at a table of all Slytherins?" she asked Hermione. "Oh dear. I pity you for having to spend so much time with a pompous prick like that."

"I don't mind, Gin," Hermione reminded her, angry to have her two friends fighting. "Listen, how 'bout we talk later. You go have fun with Neville. Enjoy yourself. Just give me an in depth explanation of everything tomorrow. Ok?"

In exasperation, Ginny shrugged and walked off giving Draco dirty glares. "I wish you would try to get along with my friends," Hermione said to him with a sigh. "You don't see me insulting yours!"

"That's because my friends just welcomed you! Why would you insult them? Alina and Geena don't send YOU death glares!"

"And that's only because you're Draco Malfoy and they're afraid of upsetting you. All Slytherins just keep their mouths shut when it comes to you."

"Well why can't you make your stupid Gryffindor friends do the same? I'm sick of them treating me like dirt and then you yelling at ME for returning the favor!"

"I only yell at YOU because it is you who provokes them! If only you would just treat them as if they were human beings and NOT the scum of the Earth!"

"I have no reason to do that!"

"You could do it for me!"

"You can't ask this of me! Your friends and I do not get along! Why can't you deal with that? I've accepted the fact that you and Pansy will never even be acquaintances... you should do the same with me and your pals."

"Draco..."

"No. That's it. End of discussion. Now I'm upset and you're upset and it's time to dance so we can lighten the mood. Let's go!" Before she could protest, he whisked her away.

"It's not even like I'm asking you to be friends with them," she continued as their feet moved in time with the music. "Just stop insulting them every time you see them."

"I want to change the subject."

"No."

"But..."

"No."

"Hermione..." Before he could say anything else, he noticed a huge crowd of Slytherins gathered in one corner. He recognized all of them, all of their families being affiliated with the Dark Lord. He also noticed that Blaise was the center of the group and every so often, the group shot Hermione and Draco suspicious looks.

"I told you I had a bad feeling about tonight" Hermione said, not even looking at the Slytherin crowd. "Something is about to happen. I feel it."

"I fear you may be right," he responded, never allowing his eyes to drift from the group that had begun their approach.

Blaise led them to where Hermione and Draco were dancing on the dance floor. Everyone else at the ball was too busy having fun to notice.

"Forgive us, My Lady," Blaise said. "We didn't know." All the Slytherins bowed their heads in what appeared to be respect. "We were blind to your heritage but we see now. If you need anything, anything at all, let us know."

They all walked away as if it had never happened and Draco nearly laughed. "See? My friends worship you!" he choked out as she sacked his arm with little force.

"That's only because they know who my father is," She was dazing out, staring off into space. She was brought back when the music ended. "Draco, could you do me a favor and take me back upstairs? I don't want to be here any longer." She was feeling very uncomfortable with all the stares she was getting.

"Of course," he replied. "Let's go." He took her hand and led her out of the great Hall and all the way up to the Head Tower. Once they got there, Draco took her in an embrace after noticing that she had begun to cry. "It's okay," he said. "Being worshipped isn't THAT bad." She laughed at this. "Ah...a smile. Good. Now what do you say to you and I putting on some music and continuing that dance?"

"Okay," she said while crying her eyes. "But first I'd like to thank you for being such a huge help to me."

"You're welcome."

"No, silly. I haven't thanked you yet!"

"Huh?"

She raised herself up to stand on her tiptoes and pulled his face down to meet with hers. It was a soft, tender kiss. The heat of her mouth warmed him through and through. they pulled apart as she whispered, "Thank you."

"It is I who should be thanking you! I've dreamt of that kiss for so long. I won't deny that I want you."

"As I do you. I've made excuses before, Draco, stupid excuses. I think that really I was just struggling to let go of the past but I don't want to dwell on that anymore. I have feelings for you, strong feelings."

"Careful, Hermione. You're starting to sound mushy," he joked as he pulled her body close to his and captured her lips within his own.

"I want tonight to be sweet, Draco," she told him, taking his hand and leading him up to her room. She waved her wand and candles were hovering in mid air circling the bed. "I read a book once that said when two wizards make love, they can make it be magical in a literal sense. A simple spell said can heighten every pleasurable moment. It'll also make sure I don't get pregnant. It's like an all in one spell."

"You read too much."

"True."

"You're sure you want this?" he asked her, taking a look around the romantic room. "I'm not going to ask again. Once you say yes, there's no going back. I won't want to stop."

"I do know what I'm doing, Draco."

"Good." His callused hands lifted her small frame up and laid her down on the bed. "I know the spell. I've read about it as well." he finally said. "It requires both of us to say it while I'm inside of you."

"What are we waiting for then?" she said coyly, taking off his costume armor while he began on her robes. They each took their time stripping each other. He wanted to make sure she wasn't going to suddenly freak out and subconsciously associate this with Riley.

When they were both naked, Hermione looked at him and it was a good feeling this time that sat in her stomach. She wasn't ashamed to let him see her and she was glad he let her see him. The scars on his body stood out fiercely and she almost flinched.

"Remember, Hermione," he said after seeing her sympathy spring

forward. "That which does not kill us."

"Right. I know. I'm sorry." He laid down on his back as she took the opportunity to straddle him. She placed her lips on his lips and then allowed her kisses to travel further south, down his chest. Her tongue traced every scar that she came across and he shivered at the warmth. It was at that moment that he truly questioned why she was able to do this. He had always heard that victims of rape always had a hard time recovering. Why was she okay?

It didn't matter much though as her lips reached back for his once more. He flipped her over and settled himself at her entrance. "Brace yourself."

He slid into her and they began to chant a spell that did more than either of them knew.

A ray of sun peeked through the window, forcing Hermione to open her eyes and wake up. She lifted her head from the pillow and began to sit up but found it difficult with the strong arms wrapped around her. Immediately, she panicked with the thought that it could be Riley. She blinked her eyes twice and then recalled the previous evening's events, quickly calming herself. She looked next to her and found a very content looking Draco peacefully sleeping.

Wondering what last night had meant to him, she nervously tapped his shoulder ever so gently, just enough to wake him up. "Morning," she said when his eyes opened. "Well actually it's 1:00 P.M. so I guess that would make it a good afternoon..."

"Morning," he cut her off, reaching up and kissing her lightly on the lips. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a log," she replied while grabbing her bathrobe from the side of her bed and putting it on quickly so he couldn't even get a glimpse. "And yourself? I trust you found the bed quite comfortable?"

"Only with you right next to me." She blushed at his comment and stooped up, keeping her back to him. Suddenly, Hedwig flew in and dropped a note on her lap which she read right away.

Hermione, we need to talk to you A.S.A.P. Harry and Ron

"I'm going to go shower. Afterwards I have to go see Harry and Ron. They claim to need my help with something. They just owled me saying that it was urgent so I won't be back until sometime later." She felt his eyes on her back as she walked away and she shuddered under his gaze. 'That was awkward,' she thought silently, wondering what exactly he was thinking at the moment.

She showered off and went back to her room, praying he was not still there. And he wasn't. She breathed a sigh of relief and quickly got dressed. She had no idea what to do about last night. She was probably just a one night stand to him. She headed down to the Great Hall where she found Harry and Ron waiting for her.

"Hermione!" Harry yelled. "Did you get my letter?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Let's go somewhere private to talk as I assume this conversation should remain highly secret." Harry nodded. "All right. Where to then?"

"We were hoping your room?" Ron squeaked. "The only other person that could possibly be there would be Malfoy and I'll take a stab in the dark in saying that he probably won't bother us too much what with your new found friendliness and all."

Hermione gulped. Should she tell them? Would they even want to know? She knew for a fact that they wouldn't approve. How would they feel about her sleeping with him? Yes, teenagers had sex all the time but it was very un-Hermione like of her especially since she had been raped. Such a horrible situation she had been in and yet, she was okay now. Maybe it was the fact that she knew that he could not hurt her any longer. Or maybe it was because she had a new father to hate.

"Sure," she replied. "Let me just go clean up first. Meet me there in twenty minutes." She ran off before they could respond. Once she reached the Head Tower, she found Draco sitting on the couch, reading a book that seemed to have captivated his interest.

"We'll be having guests in a few minutes. I need you gone," she panted out, breathless from her jog there.

"Nice to see you too," he responded without looking up. "How 'bout you try greeting me a wee bit nicer and then maybe I'll think about leaving so you can have your little threesome with Potter and Weasley."

"Draco, that's just a horrifying image! You know for a fact that I am not sleeping with either of them so just don't even go there!"

"Relax, pet," he said while standing up and putting down his book so he could approach her. "I was just joking. No need to get upset. But I would appreciate it if the next time we sleep together, you treat me

like I still matter the next day."

"Draco I..."

"You left as soon as you could and then you come back and ORDER me to leave. You didn't even say, 'Excuse me, Draco, but I have some company coming soon and I was wondering if you'd mind terribly giving us a little bit of privacy.' You basically just told me to sod off!"

"I didn't mean it to..."

"I may share the same last name as my father but I however was blessed with emotions. My heart's not made of ice and I'm not cruel and uncaring. I just want you to realize that."

"I DO realize that!"

"Really? Or are you just saying that to get me to leave?"

"I mean it. I don't want you to go. And I didn't want to leave this morning but I have obligations to my friends. I haven't managed to find five minutes for them over the past months. I'm sorry for the way I acted towards you though. I wasn't quite sure what last night meant to you and I was scared that it meant nothing. I didn't want to be the one who got attached to a man that doesn't like to settle down and that's what I've heard about you. You've never had a serious girlfriend lest you count Parkinson which the whole school knows was beyond your control."

"It's true. I don't settle down. I've never really been committed to a girl but that was because at that stage in my life, I wasn't ready to open up to anyone. I've already opened up to you, Hermione. You know my deepest secrets and I'm glad that I shared them with you. You're a good friend and for the past month or so, I've been trying to make you MORE than a friend. If I had it my way, you would have been my girlfriend the very moment we discovered each other."

A tear strolled down her cheek and he reached out to brush it away with his thumb. "So does this mean we're going out?" she asked in

hesitation.

"What do you think?" he responded, leaning in and kissing her.

"I think it's time for you to go. Harry and Ron will be here any minute."

"So? Are you not intending on telling them about us?" She didn't respond. "Alright," he sighed. "If that's what you want." He kissed her forehead and then left the Head Tower just as Ron and Harry arrived.

"We're alone," she said to them with a hint of sadness in her voice. "Now what's been going on? What is it that we need to discuss?"

"My scar," Harry said. They all took their seats in the common room. "Over the summer, it began hurting again, but more so than ever. I counted seven times that I passed out in pain because of the bloody thing! It's strange because I felt it the night that your stepfather was killed. Voldemort was angry that evening."

"That doesn't mean anything!" said Hermione, desperately trying to prevent them from finding out that Tom Riddle was in fact her father.

"Hermione, we know the truth," Ron said. "It wasn't that hard to figure out. He's your dad!"

"What are you on about?" she laughed. "Voldemort? My dad? You two have officially lost your marbles."

"Stop lying!" Harry screamed. "I just don't get it! Are you trying to protect him or are you embarrassed to be related to him?"

She blushed. Obviously it was the second one. Who wanted to be related to a heartless bastard? Certainly not her. She was very unhappy sharing blood with him. "You don't understand what it's like for me! First I got stuck with Riley which was never good to begin with. Then my mum leaves and then I find out that my read dad is Satan! What would you have me do? Confess my family history to the world?"

"Not the world," Ron growled. "Just your best friends!"

"I told you what I thought was necessary! I told you what I was ready to tell you!"

"But we're your best friends, 'Mione!" Harry sighed. "You can always tell us everything! But the whole him being your real dad thing isn't even what we were meaning to discuss with you. I had...dreams if that's even what you'd call them."

"And?"

"IN the dream, YOU are running down the corridor and at the end, there are two doors and you have to choose one."

"Well what's behind each door?"

"I've never gotten that far in the dream to know. One door though is a light colored wood with fancy engravings on it that look like earth, wind, water, and fire. It also has something in latin which we all know I don't understand. The other door is a dark mahogany and also has engravings on it, some sort of animal designs I think."

"So does that mean I have to choose between light and the dark?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"The reason we're telling you this," Ron began. "Is to ask you if you think there's a possibility that you might be torn between two things when the final war comes."

"Guys, as much as I clearly hated Riley with a passion, it's possible I hate my real dad even worse. Riley was just a drunken slob. Voldemort is a heartless arse!"

"What about your new best friend, Malfoy?"

"Draco's not evil. Trust me. He's on our side."

"I'm not too sure about him, 'Mione," Harry cut in. "He's bad news! His dad..."

"You don't know anything about his father!" she snapped. "You think it's so easy for him just because he has money and power? Well he also has pressure, pressure for the silliest things like doing well in school, dressing well, acting properly when around people his father would deem high class, pressure to belittle people his father finds too low to matter, all that fun stuff. You think he WANTS to be rude and crude and the way his is? It's not up to him! He has no choice. The minute he starts acting differently, kind or polite to people 'beneath' him, he gets..." She stopped talking, knowing full well that Draco did not want anyone else to know about his home life. "Just don't judge him," she finally said, leaning back in her seat and relaxing a bit.

"Well we just want to cover all our bases," Ron said as he sat back in his seat as well. "We don't want the dream to end the wrong way."

"Harry," Hermione said as she faced her good friend. "In the dream, do I seem panicked while I'm running, like I'm in a rush?"

"Actually you seem more calm, like you can take your time but you don't really want to. You're running because you're choosing to run, not because someone is forcing you to. It seems like you're looking for someone, like you need something."

"Harry, do you think it's possible that you've received the gift of seeing into the future? Trelawney never really thought you had the sight but she was a loon anyway. I think you're now looking into the future not only into your own life but into the lives of the people you love the most. Tell me if you think I'm way off track here."

"No, I think you're onto something," Ron agreed. "I think you're right. Harry, you could be a seer!"

"I don't want to be a seer," Harry whined. "I've got enough problems as it is! Does it look like I need to see into the future?"

"Harry, seeing into the future could help you with some of those problems," Hermione informed him. "You could prepare for what's to come before it happens. I myself would love to have that power and I would teach myself however it's one of the few things no one can learn. It's something you're born with. That's why the course itself is

pointless. It can't be taught."

"You get too excited about stuff like this," Ron yawned in boredom.

"I can't help the fact that I love the entire education process."

"I must admit that I find your thirst for knowledge quite intriguing," Harry admitted, patting her on the top of her head with a friendly smile.

"Well, you're not like most guys. Most guys are very turned off by it."

"That's not what I've heard," Ron mumbled.

"What do you mean? You mean you've heard guys talking about me?"

"Well...I mean, in the Quidditch locker rooms and stuff, guys tend to talk and well..."

"And well what?"

"You're cute, Hermione, and now in days, guys are going in that direction. They don't want the skanks and the whores who will do just about any guy that looks their way. They want a girl who appears to be the girl next door but has a slight wild side and they all think that they can find it in you."

"The girl next door with a wild side? Me? Wild side? Me?" She was flabbergasted. "I don't have a wild side. I'm boring. I'm...me!"

"Say what you want," Harry broke in. "But you and I both know that you can be crazy at times, a little dangerous. You know how to walk on the wild side when it suits you. Obviously your studies come first but I'm just saying that in a situation where you had no homework and were left alone with a guy for a lengthy period of time, you would know how to make the best of it."

"Well, I can't say that I'm completely pathetic when it comes to having a good time but...you mean other guys have thought about me like

that?"

"Yes," Harry and Ron said simultaneously.

"Well that's interesting. I never really even thought it was possible considering I'm known as the book worm Granger. I guess it's good to hear though, a self-esteem boost."

"Good to hear," Harry said.

"I think we'd better go, Harry," Ron said. "My stomachs grumbling which means it's time for dinner."

The two boys rose from their seats and headed towards the door. "You coming, Hermione?" Harry asked right before they were about to walk out.

"No, I think I'll eat here," she sighed. "I'm tired and I just want a nice relaxing dinner before I go to bed. Tomorrow we have school again so I'd better get some rest considering how exhausted I am."

The three best friends said their good byes and Hermione took her seat on the couch again, secretly waiting for Draco's return, the real reason she stayed back. She wanted to spend sometime with her "boyfriend" that evening and had she gone to dinner with the Gryffindors, there certainly would not have been much time allotted for that.

After sitting there for about a half hour or so, the portrait hole swung open and in walked Draco. "Have you been up here the whole time?" he asked with a devilish smile.

"I was waiting for you. I figured you'd come once you saw Harry and Ron without me by their side."

"Well you're right about that," he yawned as he took a seat next to her. "The two dunderheads ran into the great hall not ten minutes ago. Dinner was just about over. They were lucky to make it in time."

"Hm...that's interesting," she replied. "They left here about a half hour

ago. It couldn't have taken them twenty minutes to run from here to the Great Hall. Very interesting."

"We're not really going to spend the night talking about your other two boyfriends, are we?"

"I suppose not," she said with a smile, leaning in to properly greet him with a warm kiss.

Chapter Nineteen

She was having another one of her nightmares again. He could tell by the way she was turning and flipping around on the couch where they had fallen asleep. He was kneeling by her side, squatting on the floor after having gotten up to give her more space to turn. He stroked her hand with his thumb and kissed it gently but this only caused her to toss and turn even more. It was late in the morning, nearly six and time to get up so he shook her gently. He knew she liked to take a shower and to take her time getting ready on school mornings and breakfast was in an hour and one half.

She seemed to have been startled by Draco's shakes as she bolted right up and began panting for air. She grabbed the first thing she could which happened to be Draco and she clung to him with all her might, crying hysterically the whole time. "So much blood," she panted. "There were so many of them..."

Draco was confused by her fragmented sentences. He had figured that she would have been having nightmares about Riley again but most of those nightmares didn't include blood let alone other people.

"Never a moon so dark...cloudless...silent and alone..." she wasn't making any sense to him so he patted her back and whispered.

"Sh...it's all right," he told her. "It's okay. I'm here now." She clung to him even more tightly, using all her strength. "Come now. We have to get you ready for school. It was just a dream."

"No!" she screamed. "You NEED To save them, Draco! You have to! It's all my fault. You have to save them!"

"How?" he asked, going along with her, knowing that she was not in the right state of mind. "How can I save them? What do you want me to do?"

She stopped clinging to him and pushed back, looking straight into his eyes. He looked into her eyes as well and could see that she hadn't gotten much sleep. Her eyes were red and puffy. Blood shot.

"Stop him! You have to! He's after them! They're going to die and it's all because of me!"

"Who? Who's going to die?"

She stood up, ran to the window and threw the curtains wide open letting in the morning light. She breathed a sigh of relief that he could not comprehend.

"Hermione, what's going on? What was that all about?"

Silence. They stared at each other for a few minutes. Finally, she walked over to him and kissed his cheek softly. "You are good to me. Too good. I don't deserve you."

She began walking to the bathroom.

"Hermione, what are you talking about? How can you leave without telling me why you just had a nervous breakdown?"

She looked at him with weary eyes. "I did not sleep so well last night. I made the mistake of letting my dream get the better of me."

"That wasn't a dream, 'Mione! That was a full blown nightmare!"

She sighed once more. "Whether it was a dream, a nightmare, or a premonition...it has passed and it is time for me to shower now. I'll see you for breakfast."

"But..." however she was out of hearing range before he could say anymore. He silently cursed under his breath for women's ability to avoid matters that they did not wish to discuss. He sat on the couch and took out some last minute homework he had forgotten to do, filling time until the shower was available.

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They walked down to the Great hall for breakfast hand in hand. Now Hermione had relaxed a little about being seen with him and people knowing about their relationship but she still wanted it to be a secret.

If people made their own assumptions then that was up to them but she wasn't just going to be giving away the information voluntarily.

When they reached the Great Hall, he squeezed her hand and they split apart, walking to their own tables. Harry scooted over to make room for her and she sat down, sandwiched between Harry and Ron and sitting right across from the school gossips, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown.

"Morning," Hermione greeted them, receiving warm smiles back. "What's up?" It had been so long since she had spoken with the girls except for when she would catch them breaking curfew, sneaking out of the Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff dormitories after obviously breaking the schools number one rule: NO SEX! She only docked them points once or twice, usually too tired to listen to them whine after only one month of school.

"Is it true?" Lavender asked Hermione.

"It's a joke, right?" Parvati added. Hermione said nothing and just stared. "I told you, Lav," Parvati smiled. "Our Hermione would never."

"Oh Merlin, you had us so worried!" Lavender grinned with a relieved tone. "You have no idea how scared I was when I heard Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bultstrode talking about it! I nearly broke down and cried. I mean, how could they know before me and Parvati when you're one of our best friends?"

"I'm confused," Hermione admitted. "What did you hear?"

"A bad rumor," Parvati sighed sadly. "It would have been the juiciest gossip this school has ever seen had it been true. Don't worry though. I squashed it before it spread and ruined your good name."

"But what was it about? I don't get it!"

"They said," Lavender began. "They said that you and Malfoy..." she paused for a second for dramatic effect, giving Hermione time to sweat. "Well they said that you two had pledged your allegiance to he-who-must-not-be-named and were set to get the Dark Mark during the Christmas Holidays."

"WHAT?"

"Well as you can guess, the idea of you getting the Dark Mark seemed so absurd as it was but there was more. It was the fact that you were getting it done as an engagement present for him! You can only imagine how terrified I was. I mean, Pansy and Millicent do know everything about the workings of the Dark Side and I was thinking, why would they make this up?"

Hermione didn't hear anymore than that though because she was already passed out on the floor.

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That night, Hermione and Draco stood in front of the burning fire with their fathers faces outlined in front of them. "It's not happening! Not this soon! Too much is going on and I won't throw away my life. Not now and quite possibly not ever!"

"Hermione, calm down!" her father ordered. "Nothing is happening TODAY."

"I know what that means. That means that you want to trick me into thinking I have nothing to worry about just to shut me up meanwhile you make plans for me to get the Dark Mark and to get married all in a matter of two months or less."

"It will happen eventually, yes," he replied. "And it could happen soon but there's no need to get so excited about it just yet."

"Don't I have a say?"

"NO! My daughter will be wed to the one and only man I deem fit for her. That is Draco Malfoy. He comes from a great family and will soon be a member of my servants and one day, he will take over in my absence and you shall be the Queen of the Dark!"

"Father," Draco said, interrupting Hermione and Voldemort's conversation. "I'm not ready to get married." He was acting very calm but she could tell he just wanted to keep from angering his father TOO much.

"You're not getting married until you're out of school, don't worry," Lucius replied. "And thank you for being so mature and calm. We do appreciate it."

Putting on an act of being a good father in front of the Dark Lord, Lucius smiled warmly at his son, which caused Draco to practically gag.

Hermione sighed, ignoring her boyfriend and his own family problems for the moment. She didn't like the idea of an arranged marriage and the idea of getting the Dark Mark made her sick but they did have a point. She didn't have to worry about it yet.

"It's not even the idea of the marriage or anything though!" She suddenly added. "It's the fact that you're taking away my free will! I'm all grown up! I can make my own decisions. This is my life. Merlin knows I deserve to make choices on my own. If one day in the future, in the very distant future, I want to marry Draco and serve you in your pathetic battle then that'll be MY choice, NOT YOURS!"

"Calm yourself, Hermione," Voldemort warned. "I may be your father but I am still the Dark Lord as well! Respect should be given!"

"Yeah sure," she laughed. "You want me to respect you. I know. You said it a million times already but I would respect you much more if you treated me more like a daughter and less like one of your death eaters that you can boss around because I'm not!" she declared but after a second of thinking it over, she added, "at least I'm not YET!"

"Hermione, I'm warning you..."

"You want to know the truth? The truth is that I hate you. You make me sick. All you are is a murderer! You don't know how to be nice and you certainly do not know how to be a father. And do you care to know something else? I'm not going to be a death eater!" she reiterated for what seemed to be the twentieth time. "Harry Potter, your arch enemy, he's my best friend and I would never want to hurt him nor will I support you doing so. The aurors, the people you'll be fighting, the people you'll be killing - these are my friends. I love them dearly! I won't help you hurt them. It's bad enough that you got to my mother!"

"I've never hurt your mother!"

"Yeah right!"

"I think you need a good reminder of my strength and power. This behavior is unacceptable from my daughter!"

"Is that a bloody threat?"

"It's a promise!"

"This conversation is over!" she said, walking away from the fireplace.

"Far from it young lady," he said. She stopped walking and prepared to being the argument once more but when she turned around, there he was, standing right in front of her in the flesh.

"How did you do that? No one can apparate into Hogwarts. It's in Hogwarts: A History, all of the ten or so editions that I've read. They all say that flooing and apparition don't work at Hogwarts and only Dumbledore's office and the Head Tower and the faculty quarters are able to use floo communication."

"I'm a very powerful man, Hermione."

"Well go use your intimidation method somewhere else 'cause I'm not scared by you and your 'power'!" She used her fingers to mark the quotations around the word power to show how little respect he would receive from her. She smiled at her own confidence and let out a little chuckle.

"You find yourself humorous?"

"Quite. I think it's funny that you try to be so scary and dominating but really you're just a man like anyone else. You just know the dark curses better than most."

"Hermione," Draco said. "I think it's time we go to sleep. It's 2 A.M. and we have classes tomorrow. Just say goodnight now."

"NO!" she replied. "Not until he leaves! I need him to leave first so I know that we're safe and that the school is safe!" She looked at her father again now. "Be glad I don't report to Dumbledore that you're here right now."

"The old man doesn't scare me!"

"He should! He has triple the power and wisdom that you'll ever have! He's truly like a father to me where as you just share the same blood! I love him as my own family but you'll never see that kind of love from me because you don't know what a family even is!"

"I could be a good father if you gave me the chance!"

"Get out!"

"Who are you to order me..."

"GET OUT!" She screamed as he flew across the room. "LEAVE!" He stood up and laughed as she flung him across the room once more with her eyes. He rose from the floor once more only to be thrown into the fireplace.

"We'll discuss this later," he whispered, disappearing into the air.

She looked back to Draco with fear in her eyes, realizing what had just happened. She had lost her temper and in her rage she had picked up on wandless magic.

"I'm tired," she said while changing the subject before he could even bring it up. She walked over to the doorway to her room.

"Oh no you don't!" Draco said. "You got out of the conversation this morning. You can't get away with it twice in one day."

"But..."

"NO!"

"If I tell Harry and Ron that you're the reason I wasn't allowed to go to sleep, you're going to have hell to pay tomorrow!"

"I want to talk about this!"

"I don't," she said, walking to her room and slamming the door shut.

Chapter 20

Weeks continued to pass and still Hermione could not bring herself to speak to Draco about that evenings events. Wandless magic scared her half to death and allowing Draco to know her fear was even scarier.

But her main fear was herself. The only reason she picked up on this wandless magic was because she was angry and the scary part about anger is that it tends to control a person. Death eaters used anger as their motivation in life. They walked around with a chip on their shoulder. Her guess was they probably weren't loved enough as a child. The point is that it had become obvious to her that if she was to lose control of her emotions like that again, she would be incapable of controlling her actions. She couldn't risk it.

She decided to talk to Harry and Ron about it in hopes of a solution. Hermione had many reservations about going to the two of them but they seemed to be her only hope. Draco wouldn't understand. She felt that he had too many problems of his own to deal with. And she most certainly could not go to Dumbledore and tell him of her heritage. Her only choice was to go to her two highly immature best friends.

When she told them about that night, they reacted even worse than she had expected. Worried. They were worried. Why? Because now Voldemort, the man whose name turns people into quivering piles of JELLO, had gained an all access pass to the school.

And of course, somehow, it was all Hermione's fault.

They were so quick to blame her. They thought that she had let him in. "Like father, like daughter," they had said. "Evil must run in the family."

She tried to defend herself in hopes of them still helping her figure this thing out but they instead turned their backs on her. "We don't consort with Death Eaters," Ron had said as they walked away.

She knew something was wrong right then. They would never be so cruel to her. They were the best of friends and besides, they had

been fine with it the other night. Why had they changed their opinion so quickly?

Finally, Hermione decided it was time to speak to Draco about it. It was well into November and she found Draco in the library, studying for exams, Crabbe and Goyle right next to him, fighting over a chocolate cupcake. "Can we talk?" She asked him in a quiet voice.

He pulled out the seat right next to him and motioned for her to sit. Crabbe and Goyle took the hint and left. "Of course," he replied. "What's going on?"

She smiled at him as he took her hand in his and kissed it with a goofy grin. He was so good to her and she knew she should've gone to him in the first place. "I feel foolish," she admitted, her smile fading away. "I did something I probably should not have done."

"What did you do?" he asked in worry. "Please don't tell me you had another row with your father again. We can't afford to have this bickering. We have exams that you need to prepare for."

"No, no, no. Draco, it has nothing to do with my father," she assured him. "Actually, it's about Harry and Ron. You see, I needed to talk to someone about what happened that night. I didn't want to talk to you because you seemed so bothered about it and I didn't want you to yell at me..."

"I would never yell at you, Hermione," he tried to cut in.

"You have a bad temper, Draco," she reminded him. "You say you wouldn't yell now but something happens, one thing leads to another, you would freak out and yelling would be inevitable. But that's besides the point. The point is that I decided to talk to Ron and Harry. I went to them and told them everything as I always do but they were so cold. They basically told me that they weren't my friends anymore. They said that they couldn't be friends with someone related to their enemy. They called me a Death Eater."

"That's silly," he told her. "You're not a Death Eater yet. The earliest one can become a death eater is on the Christmas of their seventh year at school. And if Potter or the Weasel knew anything about

Death Eaters, they would know that it would be impossible for you to receive the Dark Mark unless you had agreed to it."

"Wait a minute. What? I get to have a say in it?"

"It's the death eater code. They do have some morals you know!" he exclaimed. "Besides, this way it gets rid of all the frightened little wimps, traitors, and fools. Only true followers."

Her cheeks blushed a brilliant shade of pink. She seemed embarrassed. She had been so upset that she never thought everything through completely. If she only would have stopped and talked to Draco about it, then she may have never lost Harry and Ron and she wouldn't have had to worry so much.

"I'm sorry, Draco" she said sheepishly. Her brown eyes showed how silly she felt. She hung her head down, apparently feeling quite ashamed, and her hair fell in her face. Draco noticed how beautiful she then looked and brushed some of the hair behind her ear.

"Don't apologize," he told her, leaning close and pressing a chaste kiss on her cheek. "You have nothing to apologize for. You are too beautiful to be sorry." Then his face fell. "That's why I hate to say this," he said sullenly, a dark expression on his face. "Your father will stop at nothing to make you a Death Eater."

She looked up at him with a worried expression and said, "But it's my choice in the end, right?"

"Yes...but at the same time, not really." His voice saddened even more. He didn't want to see her get hurt but that was what this was leading to and he had to do this. It was for the best. "He feels that you are what has been missing in his ranks. You've been fighting against him all these years and all these years, Potter has managed to evade him. Your father thinks that with you on his side, as a spy and out of the way, maybe Potter won't have the brains to save his own arse."

Tears were in Hermione's eyes. "I won't leave Harry on his own!" she stated matter-of-factly. "I won't let him die!"

Draco sighed. This was going to be difficult. "He's not giving you much of a choice, Hermione. He's going to use your mum as incentive."

"WHAT?" she practically yelled, forgetting that she was in a library. "But he said that he loved her, that he would never hurt her!"

"Sometimes, men are blinded by ambition, so much so that love means nothing to them," he explained. "He WILL use her, Hermione. He may love her but he's overwhelmed with his hatred. He won't rest until he has Potter's head on his wall. Don't you get it? You're not safe. If you refuse to join his ranks, I fear you may be in danger. Your mother, your friends, your way of life, everything that you hold dear. He'll destroy them all, Hermione, and he'll have no problem doing it!"

She dried the tears that she had been about to shed. "I am not afraid of him."

"You may not be...but your mother is." It made him angry to have to say such words to her but he needed her to understand everything that was going on. She had to understand the severity of the entire situation.

And she did. Inside she knew that she had no choice. He would go after her friends and he would come to school and terrorize her until finally she could resist no longer.

"I know," she finally gave in. Her heart was battling. She did not want to fight against Harry and Ron but she didn't want anyone to get hurt because of her either.

"At Christmas, he wants us to go to my house," Draco informed her. "You'll be staying at Malfoy Manor, under strict orders from your father. On the Eve before Christmas, we shall gather in the ceremony room. As the clock strikes midnight, our fate shall be sealed. There is no choice for us."

They held hands with one another, the news being hardly bearable for either of them to withstand. "On Christmas Day," Hermione whispered. "...we're going to sacrifice our own lives for that madman's

crazy beliefs." She leaned her head on his shoulder and he gently kissed her forehead.

"My dear sweet Hermione..." He didn't say anything else. They just sat there like that, their thoughts swimming around, plaguing them until finally Hermione stood up.

"It is late. We should get to bed now." She began walking and left him there as he gathered all his books and such.

He walked back to their dormitory all alone. With too much time on his hands, he began thinking about the first night they had been together. It then dawned upon him just how long ago it had been. They had not slept together since. Of course they had been having many little fights and there wasn't much time but he still wanted to feel her touch once more. He missed her.

And now she was making him walk back to the dormitory alone. He wondered why but didn't think too much about it. It didn't really matter. As long as she was still his and they weren't in a fight. He fought too much with her. It really wasn't good for them.

He entered the Head Tower and found her sitting on his bedside, waiting for him to return. She was wearing a pink silk bathrobe that only reached mid thigh.

"It's a Friday," she said. "We don't have to wake up tomorrow so I figured we could take a nice hot bubble bath together." She was smiling at him, something he hadn't seen her do in a long while.

"That sounds like a lovely idea, pet," he said. "Why don't you go in and start the water and I'll be there in a bit." She got up and gave him a small kiss on the lips and he smiled in response.

When she left the room, he took off his shirt and quickly put a concealment charm over all his scars. He did not want this evening to turn into a sad evening. He then put on his own bathrobe and headed to the bathroom to join his girlfriend.

He found her already in the tub, bubbles covering her features. "Hop in, Draco," she told him. "The water's so warm and wonderful. Join me!"

He stood by the sink and admired her beauty. Her arms were resting on the side of the tub and her one leg was propped up on the back wall. Her hair was pulled back in a sloppy braid with stray hairs falling into her face. "Are you mine, Hermione?" he asked. "Are you all mine and nobody else's?"

She giggled. "You're acting strange again, aren't you? Well fine, I'll play along. Yes Draco, of course I'm all yours."

"And if I asked you to do something without question, would you do it?"

"What's this about, Draco? You're acting insane!"

"Would you do it?"

She looked at him strangely and could tell that he was being serious. He really wanted her to answer. "I guess. It depends on what you asked me to do."

"Don't try to make up with Potter or Weasley."

"What?"

"No matter what, don't try to be friends with them again. Don't talk to them. Don't look at them. Don't think about them."

"What? Draco, I am so confused. Why are you asking this of me?"

"They're dangerous. I don't trust them. I don't want to get into it right now, but just do it for me, Hermione! Please?"

"I...I...I don't know...I..."

"Please, Hermione." His eyes told her that he was being sincere and not just holding a grudge. They were softer than usual, as if he was letting his guard down. Afraid.

"I...I don't...I don't get it but...well...I...I guess, Draco. If that's what you think is safer."

"It is. It really is."

Draco hopped in and got in a good position so Hermione's back was resting against his chest and they were just laying there in comfort. They did not have sex that evening. Both were just content being in the presence of one another. Neither was really in the mood to make love.

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At around one in the morning, Hermione fell asleep in the tub so Draco picked her up and brought her to his bed after drying her off and dressing her in pajamas. He wrapped her well in his blankets so she wouldn't be cold and then he snuck off to the common room.

"What took you so long?" a deep voice from the shadows questioned.

"I had to get her in bed," Draco explained, not at all surprised by the mans presence. "It was a bit of an overwhelming day for her, don't you think? I mean, she's had to deal with a lot."

"It is for her own good."

"I'm not sure about this. It's risky. She could wind up getting hurt."

"Not if you watch out for her like we discussed. Take care of her, protect her. Don't let her get hurt and then I'm sure she'll be fine."

"I don't know why we're doing this to her anyway. She should know. She should have all the knowledge necessary to make her own choice."

"NO! We must make it for her. She wouldn't understand."

"Hermione's a very smart girl," Draco informed him. "You're not giving her enough credit."

"Trust me, I do know how smart that girl is but when it comes to her emotions, she gets far too confused."

"I don't know. I'm not sure I can go through with this."

"Listen to me, Malfoy. I just need her to believe that I'm a danger to her. She can't trust me and I need him to see that. If he sees that she doesn't talk to me anymore, then he won't send her as his little messenger or spy to get information. I don't want to put her in that situation." Finally Harry stepped out of the shadows. "I'm not letting her be endangered just so Voldemort can get to me. This is ridiculous."

"Potter, I really think she should know the plan."

"No! She's a bad actress."

"Come on! I can't lie to her!"

"You think it was easy for ME? I had to tell her that I couldn't trust her anymore. I had to tell her that I didn't want to be her friend anymore. The look on her face nearly made me cry. Once again I repeat, you think that was easy for me?"

"Potter, I know you love her and all but it's just...well...I'm not good at the whole lying thing."

"But you're a Slytherin. Aren't Slytherin's supposed to be excellent at lying?"

"Ha...Ha...Ha. Good one. Really."

"Listen, Malfoy. I'm going to cut to the chase now. You yourself have said that Hermione will join Voldemort if it means saving a few lives, right?"

"...well...yeah...I guess," he stumbled, unsure of where Harry was going with this and not liking the fact that he felt like an idiot right now.

"And if she joins him, he'll use her as a spy, right?"

"...yeah," he slowly said once more. "But..." This was so uncommon for him to not be able to form a sentence.

"And when she refuses to spy for him, he'll attack her, right?"

"But Potter..."

"She's at risk, Malfoy! I won't put Hermione at risk! If she stays away from me and Ron, you can tell Voldemort that we all had a big falling out. Then he'll see that she can't spy for him and she won't be at risk of being forced into being a Death Eater."

"Yes but he may still want her to join his ranks."

"But this could buy us time!" Harry said optimistically. "Maybe she could then get it pushed back to graduation or mid summer or something! That would give us time to come up with a good plan of attack while keeping Hermione out of harms way."

"Potter, I know what you're getting at but I just doubt it will work. Hermione won't stay away from you. You're her best friend. Besides, there's still the chance that her father will want it to be at Christmas anyway. He probably wants it to be as soon as possible. You know, she's given him hell so far, won't let him even try to be a real dad to her. I'm sure he's looking at this as his new way to "bond" with her."

"We have to try something, Malfoy. At least we'll give it our best shot."

Little did they know that that evening, someone had overheard their entire conversation and the outcome would not prove to be good.

Chapter 21

In the following weeks leading up to Christmas, Hermione had managed to cut all ties with Harry and Ron. The only conversations they shared were arguments, the type of arguments she used to have with Draco. They would insult her, calling her cruel names and persisting that she had become an evil whore. Draco, who was now always at her side, would retaliate for her and the whole school managed to hear about their fights. Word of the Golden Trio Split Up had spread quickly.

By the time Hermione and Draco went to Malfoy Manor, it had become obvious that Hermione no longer had any connection with Harry Potter. Voldemort was more than a little disappointed. He had planned on using her as a spy, getting information out of her and using her to lure Harry into a trap but now it was apparent that Harry would not be chasing after her to rescue her.

It seemed a little suspicious to him though that Hermione and Harry could become enemies so quickly but he figured teenagers were very fickle and emotional like that.

At the Manor, Hermione was shown to her own room, which was coincidentally right next to Draco's. She was told to join everyone for dinner in fifteen minutes, giving her just enough time to unpack a few of her things.

At the dinner table, Lucius, Narcissa, Draco, Helen, Voldemort, and Hermione all sat around like old friends would.

"So Hermione," her mother began. "How has school been? Are you keeping your grades up?"

Hermione smiled a slightly nervous smile. "Well now that we're in seventh year, the professors are preparing us for N.E.W.T.S. and the courses are significantly more difficult. And being Head Girl has added duties that I've been struggl..."

"She's doing spectacularly," Draco cut in. "You know our Hermione. She can do just about anything she sets her mind to, and she includes acing all her courses, beating everyone in the N.E.W.T.S. in all areas,

AND handling all of the duties and responsibilities that Dumbledore gives her."

"It never ceases to amaze me how talented you are, Hermione," Helen declared, beaming with pride. "I'm just so proud of you."

Hermione gave a halfhearted smile and began to eat her food.

"So about Christmas Eve," she said, eager to get this fight over with. "Draco told me that that is the day you plan on making me get the Dark Mark."

"Yesss," Voldemort hissed. "That IS the day."

"I think you're insane then!" Hermione said in anger. "You cannot simply force me into something that I do not wish to do. You're being irrational. I want to wait. If I'm going to have to get it, can't we do it in the summer or something when I don't have to deal with school and my grades and everything like that?"

"NO!" he replied. "Now is the time. Now is when I want you to pledge your allegiance to me. Now you can truly be my daughter."

"But I don't WANT to be your daughter!"

"That is not your choice. I am in you blood."

"Blood has never made a difference to me. What makes you think that just because we share the same DNA, that means I'll ever think of you as anything more than an evil and cruel bastard?"

"When you receive the Dark Mark, your view will change. The ceremony bonds all of my followers to me. Even if originally they feel differently, by the end, they are my faithful servants."

"When this war starts, I am leaving. I will fight against you. I will make sure Harry can destroy you, even if he will not accept my help."

"You will do no such thing. Once the dark mark is burned into your forearm, you will not be able to function unless it is under my

command. The pain would be unbearable. You will not fight against me."

"Watch me."

"You do not know the consequences of betraying me."

"I do NOT fear you," she hollered in anger. "If anything, I pity you, for you have no one to love you, no one to take care of you in your weakened state, no one to call you father, and no one to mourn you once you die. If you think for one minute that my mother could actually still love you after everything you've done, after all the people you have killed, then you are sadly mistaken."

"Hermione," Helen said, trying to stop her daughter from saying anything else incriminating.

"Do NOT try to shush me, mother. You have been quiet enough for the both of us."

"You are testing my patience, daughter," Voldemort said in anger.

"Good. Let me test it further then. I hate you. And when Harry Potter destroys you, I shall stand over your lifeless body and laugh. My mother and I will walk away in happiness from the battle that will save our lives. I will then go to Harry and beg him to be my friend once more and we will laugh for the rest of our lives about how sad and pathetic you were in your final moments."

"I will not allow you to speak in such a manner."

"I HATE YOU!"

"CRUCIO!" he yelled without even needing his wand. He watched her fall to the floor in agony. As she writhed on the ground, silent tears falling down her cheeks, he laughed. "GUARDS! Take her to the dungeons. Chain her to the wall and make sure she can't escape." He released Hermione from the curse and watched her pant, trying to catch her breath. "You will soon know what happens when you insult the Dark Lord."

"Don't you dare touch her again!" Helen screamed. "She is your daughter. How dare you Crucio your own daughter!"

"I WILL DISCIPLINE MY CHILD AS I SEE FIT!"

"Then you shall rot in hell!" Hermione screamed as she lifted her wand up, breaking away from the guards.

Voldemort then backhanded Helen right across her face and Hermione screamed in horror. "You attack me and your mother will be put in the middle," he informed her. "I do not wish to do this but you leave me no choice. You will obey my commands."

"You miserable piece of shit!"

"Watch your mouth," he told her, finally taking out his own wand. "Now give the guards your wand and let them take you downstairs."

"I will submit to no one."

He pointed his wand at Helen.

"I WILL KILL YOU!" she screamed at him in frustration.

"None but Harry Potter can do so."

In anger, she ran up to him and smacked him across the cheek. "The day shall come where you will be at the other end of a wand that will terrify you to no end and when that time comes, I will be there, watching triumphantly."

She walked back to the guards and gave one her wand. They grabbed her by the arms and led her away.

"HERMIONE!" Draco screamed after her, standing up and getting very angry.

"Draco, sit down!" his father commanded. "This is none of your business."

"He's going to torture his own daughter!"

"My Lord," Lucius said, addressing Voldemort in a scared tone. "Forgive him, please. He is blinded by his emotions. It is a common thing amongst teens. You know how love makes them think that they must put their own lives on the line for their loved ones. It is a silly thought."

Draco grew angrier and angrier and ran up to his room.

"Ah, children," Voldemort sighed. "Mood swings and hormones. That's all they are."

"I happen to think," Narcissa finally piped in, "That Draco's love for the girl is just the darlinest thing ever. They're so cute together."

"That is why they will be wed soon enough," Lucius agreed.

"Yes, of course," Voldemort joined in. "The two truly do make a wonderful couple. What better than a Malfoy with the daughter of the Dark Lord? They shall be a deadly couple once they join my ranks."

"I don't want her to join your ranks," said Helen in defiance. "She's too smart, too talented, too wonderful to waster her life, her brains, everything she has worked for!"

"Helen, I'm warning you as well..."

"If you are going to keep her locked up in those dungeons..."

"JUST until she learns to keep her mouth shut."

"Must we really discuss such matters?" Narcissa asked with uneasiness. "Let us just finish our dinner in peace."

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After dinner, Voldemort took Helen up to their room in the manor and began yelling at her. "How dare you embarrass me like that in front of the Malfoy's? I will make the final decisions on Hermione's fate! I am her father and I am now in charge."

"I disagree with that! I am her mother, I am her primary care giver, and I have been with her since birth. I am the only one she can depend on and I am the only one she will listen to. You have no say!"

"You are wrong!" Helen was silence by the back of his hand once more.

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In the dungeons, the guards were sneering at Hermione, looking her up and down with lustful eyes. Hermione couldn't help but think of Riley on the first night he had attacked her. He had tied her to the bedposts and undressed her first with his eyes. He had told her how beautiful she was and then continued to say that when he was through with her, she'd be the dirtiest whore ever.

She grew more nervous when the guards began to approach. The look in her eyes told her they were up to no good. 'Why does he have guards here in the manor anyway?' she questioned herself in annoyance. 'He can summon anyone up at the drop of a hat. Why does he need guards?'

It didn't really matter though. The guards were still there and they were still approaching. They were dangerous and they were snickering. She grew more and more fearful with every step that they took. "Look at the little wench," once laughed. "She's afraid. She's hot. Let's take her." He was a good 6'4" and had a very muscular build. He had dark eyes, the color of the night sky, and his hair matched perfectly.

"Lay one hand on me and I swear you'll die!" she warned them, false courage pushing its way to the top, above her fear and anger.

"What can you do without a wand?" the other laughed, waving her wand in her face. He was a little bit shorter and it was clear that this was the only way he could ever strike fear into people.

It was then, as she thought about just how cowardly he was that he had to tie girls up in order to feel good about himself, that her wand found itself buried deep in that man's eye as he fell to the ground with

blood streaming down his face. "What the...?" the first guards asked in nervousness.

He was pushed back against the wall and a knife was in the center of his stomach. Hermione was using wandless magic, blinding one guard and murdering the other.

She then heard an applause coming from the top of the stairs. Voldemort stepped out of the shadows. "I'm impressed. But then again, you ARE the great Hermione *Granger*. Your mother tells me every day that I should be proud of you. And I will be. Once you join my ranks."

"Never." She was still chained up on the wall but her courage had managed to take over. Her fear had been suppressed.

"I will break you."

"I didn't crack when Riley raped me. I think I can withstand a few crucio's."

"We'll see."

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Draco found Hermione in her bed later that night. She was too weak to move. He sat next to her and kissed her cheek. She moved back away from him, not wanting to be touched any more that evening.

"Hermione, I brought you some dinner," he informed her. "I know you didn't get a real chance to eat this evening and I figure you've got to be hungry."

After some hesitation, she took the plate right out of his hands and began to eat the delicious meal he had prepared for her.

As she ate, she watched Draco send Damion out the window with a note attached to his leg. "Whom did you write to?" she asked. "Harry?"

"What?" he asked in surprise.

"You owed Harry, didn't you?"

"What makes you think I would owl Scarhead?"

"Oh cut the bull, Draco. I heard you two speaking that one evening. I know that you two planned to get me out of having to get the Dark Mark."

"How did you...? But? I...We ...We were so careful. You were asleep."

"No I wasn't. I was just pretending to be asleep. I followed you down the stairs."

"You're so nosey," he laughed.

"So did you owl him?"

"Maybe."

"Why? I don't want him coming here. I don't want him to risk his life. Not yet. He's not ready. No one is ready."

"They're ALL ready, Hermione. Listen, I was going to wait and tell you this later but I guess now is the right time. The D.A along with the Order of the Phoenix has been meeting together since October. They've been training, studying blueprints of the manor, thinking of strategies and everything. But the biggest surprise happened about a week ago."

"What happened?"

"Well..."

"Well what? What happened, Draco?"

"I don't know if you're ready. It's a shocking surprise."

"What are you talking about Draco? Spit it out already!"

"I ... I don't know. What will you give me if I tell you?"

"DRACO!"

"Will you give me a kiss for it?"

She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

"Not enough."

A little tongue action and a sort of grunting noise gave her the final answer.

"Sirius Black came back."

Chapter 22

Behind the darkness of the veil, he had been waiting for his chance. He was holding on to memories, new and old. With a happy smile and overwhelming feelings of joy, knowing today would be the day, he waited.

Of course he had been waiting like this everyday for about a year and a half now. He couldn't walk, couldn't blink, couldn't feel. All that was there was his mind. He wasn't even sure if his body was still intact. But he knew he could get out...and he would.

He looked at the veil as a person, a prison guard almost. If he annoyed it long enough, eventually it would give up and let him free. Day by day, he reached out, all the spells and curses he knew having little effect. But he could feel the veil weakening.

He knew all about the veil. In fact, it had been one of his favorite inventions. He, James, and Remus had created it right before the death of Lily and James.

It's purpose was to swallow all evil. A more permanent prison. Azkaban, he knew it had kinks to work out. The number one kink being it was part of the government. Which meant that should you be sent there, you were most likely found guilty by a jury of some sort. Which means you could be innocent all along and just framed for the murder.

So they made the veil. It ONLY swallowed inhumanity, more simply defined as evilness. It rejected anyone with a good heart.

But then why did it swallow him?

Because he wasn't all human. He was an animagus which meant that the veil could get confused. And it did. It couldn't tell what he was and so it took him anyway.

The way he had created it, he made sure there was no possible way of escaping. Now he needed to figure it out.

He assumed that his key would be to focus on the good in him and forget about the animal instincts he often had.

He dreamt of nothing but James, Lily, Remus, and Harry. His friends from the Order and all the kind people who helped him so many times after breaking out of Azkaban.

And day by day the resistance wore down. The veil seemed to get weaker and weaker, as if giving in.

So one day it happened. He could feel again. His hands, his legs, his face.

He could smell. The horrible smell of old men and women who get sponge baths daily...the hospital smell.

And he could hear. "I have to see him! He's the only family I've got left! Let me see him!"

He could see. Harry was being held back by several of the nurses.

He groaned as he tried to sit up in his bed. The nurses turned to take care of him and Harry practically jumped on the bed next to him. He was very glad to be back.

The next two days, Hermione continued her fighting with Voldemort. Their arguments always wound up with her writhing in pain as he used the cruciatus curse time after time.

Every time they fought, Draco was locked in his room. Apparently, his father knew he would get in the Dark Lords way and he couldn't have that.

Night after night, Hermione and Draco sat up in her room, Draco tending to her wounds and Hermione crying herself to sleep, her only comfort held in his touch.

"I'd kill him if I could," he whispered to her every night. "Don't worry though. Potter's on the way. It's only a matter of time."

But time was not on Hermione's side. Every second she spent with her father brought back all her summer memories. It was not good for her psyche.

She woke up one morning, feeling very sore and very grumpy. Draco was seated next to her with a sneer on his face. "What's got you so angry?" she asked him with curiosity.

"Lucius came in this morning."

"What happened?"

"He said we'd be taking our prep courses today."

"What's a prep course?"

"There's two different prep courses, depending on what your parents think you need more of. You see, getting the dark mark requires certain things. One is that you'll have the right attitude once you become a Death Eater. You need to have certain mannerisms and such. The second course teaches tolerance of pain. The Dark Mark can hurt like nothing we've ever felt before apparently and so they teach you how to take it like a Death Eater would."

"Well you and I both know that that course is out of the question. Our parents have been giving that course to us for a while now." She was so right, too. If it wasn't Voldemort, it was Riley. Draco and she could take it.

"So pureblood, Death Eater proper etiquette is the obvious choice. That means that Aunt Bella will be teaching."

"Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"That's my aunt."

"She'll be teaching us?"

"She's one of his favorites. My mum and dad usually teach the course to new members but since I'm their son, Voldemort said he'd best get Bella to teach."

She sat in silence for a moment. "Wonderful." Sarcasm was always pleasant first thing in the morning.

-

"Rule number one to being a death eater: Always obey your Lords every command. He will never steer you wrong." Hermione raised her hand. "Yes?" Bellatrix asked.

"Well what if he IS wrong? Pretend that he commands that we attack the ministry, and though we know that they would be expecting that, we go anyway. They're ready for us and we fail the mission. So why would we follow a stupid Lord?"

"First of all, we never attack the obvious places. The Dark Lord is much more creative than that."

"But..."

"SECONDLY, I don't want anymore hypothetical situations. You're scenario is impossible. DON'T annoy me again. Now...the next thing you need to know is all the dark arts magic that you possess right in your little wand." Hermione's hand raised once more. "Yes, Ms. Riddle?"

"My name is Hermione. Thank you very much. And I was wandering about wandless magic. You spoke about using wands but what about the magic we possess in our minds. It's true that magic comes from the person, not the wand, right?"

"Well...yes. That's true..."

"So a wand is totally unnecessary, correct?"

"Well no, most people need it to..."

"But those who are powerful and strong minded don't need it. It's just a beginners tool, yes?"

"Um...no...yes...no, I mean..."

"My dad doesn't need it. My mum doesn't need it. I know that sometimes, I don't need it, so in all honesty, a wand only serves the purpose of false confidence. Right?"

"Ms. Hermione, stop your questioning this instant."

Draco choked back a laugh and his aunt shot him an evil glare. "Don't laugh, Draco. You think this kind of behavior will be tolerated by the Dark Lord?"

"I for one KNOW he would never tolerate this," Hermione declared. "But then again, I really didn't give a flying fuck what he will or will not tolerate. He can kiss my arse..."

The door flew open. "I send you to get lessons on proper etiquette and this is how you spend your time?" her father asked in annoyance.

"I was merely asking questions," she replied. "It's not my fault that your servant is too incompetent to answer."

"You were intentionally trying to make her frustrated, Hermione."

"What are you going to do about it? You and I both know that the Crucio's have still yet to affect me."

"Maybe I should try a more painful method of punishment?" he asked, raising an eyebrow in curiosity, happily awaiting her response.

"Whatever you think will work," she told him, glaring him down. "I'm more than willing to try anything once."

"What about serving me?"

"Maybe I should choose my words more carefully."

"Mr. Riddle, if I may interfere," Draco said in a nervous voice. "I'd just like to say that I don't think the cruciatus curse is any good for Hermione."

"Oh really?" he asked with an inquisitive tone.

"Yes."

"And how do you suppose I discipline my daughter?"

"Lines."

Everyone chuckled slightly. "You want me to have her sit in a dark room and write lines for hours on end."

"Fifteen minutes ought to do." He got no response. "Twenty sound better?" Still Voldemort looked at him with a blank expression. "Twenty five is my final offer."

"You shouldn't have egged him on like that."

In Draco's bedroom, Hermione took care of the lashes on his back. Her father had been offended by the casual joking manner that he spoke to him in. And so he was whipped for his insolence.

"You know I can handle whatever he throws at me," she said to Draco. "You don't need to fight my battles for me."

"I can take it."

She laughed. "I know. I just don't like you taking his crap for me."

"It's alright. Really. I'm just glad you've not been hurt."

She smiled at him. "Actually..."

"What? What do you mean 'actually'?"

"I mean he told me to join him for a midnight snack."

"That doesn't sound bad," Draco said hopefully.

"In the dungeon," Hermione added.

"Oh." They both went quiet.

"You were very brave back there," she said to him, breaking the silence. "I haven't seen such bravery in a while. I was highly impressed."

"I was just defending my woman."

"Your woman? YOUR woman?"

"Yes. MY woman!"

"Too possessive, I think."

"You can't change my possessiveness."

"I don't like that very much. It seems to me that you grew up very spoiled in every way. Toys, women, anything you wanted, you got."

"Until I hit a certain age, yes."

"Don't expect me to give you everything you want just because your parents used to."

"I wouldn't dare." They fell asleep in actual good moods that evening for the first time in a while.

"If we attack from the back entrance during their ceremony, it can pretty much be guaranteed that they won't even know we're there until we get to the dungeons," Remus said with confidence.

"But what if Draco was just luring us there? What if they're ready for us?" Snape said in nervousness. "Malfoy's are very good actors when they want to be. How do we know that they're not tricking us into a trap?"

"Not everyone is evil like you'd like to believe, Snivelus," Sirius Black responded. "Just because the older Malfoy is evil doesn't mean the younger one is. You have a terrible way of believing children to be the same person as their parents. Why do you do that? Clearly, Harry was never James but you took out all your hate for James on poor Harry. Why?"

"This isn't the time, Sirius," Dumbledore said. "We need to focus. Severus is just making sure we're aware of all the possibilities."

"I say we attack the night after Christmas. They won't expect it then," Remus said once again with a strong feeling.

"But that's no good!" Harry and Ron screamed out.

"Hermione gets her mark on Christmas Eve!" Harry shouted. "I don't want her to get the Dark Mark before we attack. She can't get the mark!"

"I understand," Remus said, "But attacking on Christmas Eve could be a very stupid idea. Attacking BEFORE Christmas Eve could also be bad too. They'd be expecting us."

"But that means we're leaving Hermione all on her own. She'll be forced to get the dark mark. Malfoy told me that Voldemort is using the Cruciatus on her. And NONE of that will change your mind?"

"You think too much with you emotions, boy," Snape snarled. "You have to think overall. She'll live through the Dark Mark but if we attack at a bad timing, many could lose their lives. Think, child!"

"Don't talk down to him, Snivelus!" Sirius said. "Is this how you've been while I was gone? How dare you!"

"He's using his heart, not his head. You think that's intelligent?"

"I think he's thinking heroically. I think he's thinking like a true hero and that means the world to me."

"You always were a fool, Black."

"Maybe if you hadn't had such an attitude we would have been a little nicer to you."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been such foul scums in the first place."

"You antagonized us!"

"You deserved it! Walking around like you owned the place from day one."

"It's called confidence. We had it. You didn't."

They both started yelling back and forth and soon Remus joined the fight. Many voices began shouting and soon it became too much.

"Please, calm down everyone," Dumbledore said, hushing them all. "We need to decide a plan of action. I think it's best to..."

"Excuse me, sir?" Ron piped up.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley?"

"Um...well...I just thought you'd like to know that...well...um..."

"What is it boy?" Snape growled. "We haven't got all day."

"Harry's gone to save Hermione."

Chapter 23

"A midnight snack in the dungeons," Hermione thought to herself bitterly. "More like a midnight beating. Just great. And now Draco and I are all on our own. No Harry to save my neck this time."

She walked down to the dungeons with her head held high. She was after all a Gryffindor and bravery and pride were built into her after years with Harry and Ron.

"It is 12:02," she heard her father say when she reached the last step. He was sitting in a chair much like a throne.

"I like to be fashionably late," she replied. "Besides, I wasn't quite in a rush to get beaten tonight, thank you very much."

"Punctuality is a very important concept, my child. I will teach it to you tonight. What were you doing that delayed you? Stalling?"

She rolled her eyes. "If you must know, I was tending to Draco's wound. You need to learn how to take a joke especially since he was only trying to help me out a bit," she scoffed.

"You don't need any help. You're a Riddle. You can handle it. Now, it has been brought to my attention that young Mr. Malfoy has been in league with Potter and his little army for a little while now, trying to prevent you from getting your mark. If you tell me that this was all your influence, I won't have him killed."

She didn't even hesitate with her response. "I asked him for his help. He did it for me."

"And then you asked Mr. Potter to come here and try to save you?"

"How do you know all this?" she questioned with fury. "Have you been spying on me? Have you intercepted my owls? What have you done?"

He snickered. "I didn't need to do any of that." The dungeons were dark and Hermione listened carefully as her father said a spell to light up the room. "All I had to do was catch Mr. Potter trying to sneak in

through your bedroom window." Hermione turned around to see the lit dungeons fully now. She found Harry bound and gagged on the floor.

"HARRY!" she cried out, rushing to his side. She took the gag away and began untying his bonds. "Are you okay, Harry? Did he hurt you?"

He gasped for air when the gag was released and responded, "I'm fine. I was trying to save you." She hugged him and he smiled.

"I wish Draco would have told you I'm a big girl. I can handle myself."

"Young ones," Voldemort hissed. "Might I remind you that both of your lives are in danger?"

"And you said you knew how to love your family," Hermione almost laughed. "You want to know the strength of a family bond?" She hugged Harry tightly. "THIS is family love. He was scared for me, knew all the risks in trying to save me, and yet here he is. He came for me. Harry is my brother."

"Prepare to watch you brother die," he replied, raising his wand with a wicked grin on his face.

He half expected her response though. She had stood in front of him. "You'll have to kill me first if you dare."

Harry pushed her away. "Don't be a fool, Hermione," he told her. "This isn't your fight. I'm the one who's supposed to die. Not you."

"No, Harry," she responded. "It's HIM who will die," she continued, motioning towards her father. "The man can't even love a daughter properly."

"I suggest you learn to stay quiet dear," Voldemort informed her. "Once Potter is gone, I might be inclined to kill the young Malfoy boy just for the hell of it. Now be a good girl and tie your friend back up."

Her mouth gaped open in awe at his foolishness. "Do you honestly believe that I would willingly tie my best friend back up for you to torture him?"

"Only if you want your mother to live," he warned. "GUARDS!" The dungeon door swung open and two new guards came down the stairs carrying Helen in between them. "I already took away all her magic. Such a simple spell it is. She can't perform even the most basic of spells until I give her magic back to her. She's now as useless as a muggle."

Hermione just smiled. "And I love her all the same." She knew exactly what to say to get on his nerves. If she was angry, worried, or surprised by the way he was treating Helen, she sure didn't show it.

"Guards," Voldemort hissed. "Show my daughter how we treat muggles here." The guards snickered and began to chain Helen up to the wall. She looked so helpless and afraid.

"WAIT!" Harry screamed. "Please just do it, Hermione," he begged. "I'll be okay. Promise. Just do what he wants and your mum will be alright."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Why would you take away her magic?" she asked her father. "What did she do to you?"

"It was her punishment. She had learned to be resistant to the Imperious curse and continuously disagreed with my parenting decisions. No one defies me and gets away with it."

Hermione turned to Harry. "I guess it's too late to commit suicide?" she jokingly asked with fright in her voice.

"Relax," he told her. "It's not like you'll be killing me. It's just tying me up."

"Actually now you'll be in chains, Mr. Potter," Voldemort informed him. "The ropes were merely for a more classic effect. Chain him now, Hermione."

Harry backed up against the wall by Helen and lifted his arms near the chains. Hermione walked over to him and as tears finally streamed down her face, she locked the chains. Then she leaned in to kiss his cheek. Very quietly and discreetly so no one could tell, she whispered, "I will save you, Harry Potter. I will. When everyone is gone, try to use wandless magic. I know you can Alohamora yourself out of this. Be very careful and sneak up to my room. I believe Draco gave you a map already."

She stepped back and walked over to her mom. "Let her go," she commanded the guards. They looked to Voldemort for permission but he gave none.

"Your mother will be released upon your surrender. Give up and join my inner circle. Serve me like you were born to do," he ordered her. "I can't make you but I can find ways to convince you. Now surrender!"

"Let her go and give me the night to contemplate my surrender. I understand your command requires me to stop fighting. I need time for that. Let her go now. I chained Harry like you asked."

He cackled. "I would have ordered you to kill him if I thought there was any chance of that happening." There was a look of pure evil in his eyes. He wanted bloodshed.

Hermione gulped. "Please let my mum go. Please" she begged. "I can't take it. You're hurting my friends AND my family and it's killing me."

"THEN GIVE IN! Become a death eater. Tomorrow night."

Her head was spinning. Her whole world was about to collapse and she wanted so badly to go back to school and hide there for as long as she still could.

She dropped to the floor in weakness. "If that is the only way," she murmured. "I'll do it. But please keep Draco out of it."

"NEVER! The young Malfoy was sworn to join my ranks since before he was born. He is my servant, as was his destiny, as is yours as well."

She hung her head low in defeat. "I'll go to my room now. I guess I'll need some sleep for tomorrow." She walked up the stairs of the dungeon with feet that felt as heavy as lead. It took all of her energy make herself move. She heard behind her, her mother was being released. "The only good thing I did all night," she murmured to herself.

She walked up the numerous flights of steps for what felt like hours and finally reached her room. Draco was on her bed waiting for her. "How was the snack?" he joked, seeing the tears on her face.

"Clearly, I do not wish to speak about it," she said, grabbing pajamas from her suitcase and walking to the bathroom to change.

"Did I get you in trouble?" he asked through the door. She didn't reply. "Merlin that man's a jerk. He's so insane. It's as if he doesn't even care about you." Then there was a knocking on the window and he went to check what it was.

It was Damion and he had a note.

"Finally," he muttered. "Potter finally sent a reply," he informed Hermione. She ignored him.

Malfoy,

Harry's left to come save you guys all on his own. The Order was planning on waiting until after Christmas. He felt that would be too late. Ron then chased after him. Please keep them out of harms way until we can attack.

Sincerely,
Sirius Black

P.S. anything happens to Hermione or Helen and you are dead.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Potter decided to try and be a hero, eh?" he asked when Hermione came out of the bathroom.

"I told you already. I don't want to talk about it," she reminded him, taking a seat on the bed and combing her hair. "It's already said and done and we can't change what happened."

"Wealsey came after him."

"WHAT?"

"He's here somewhere, or on his way. Black just owled me and told me so."

"We should go looking for him," Hermione commented. Draco acted as though he had not realized she was basically asking him to do it. "I'm really too tired to go looking though, Draco. Would you mind finding him for me, please?"

HE once again rolled his eyes. "I'll look for one half an hour then I'm coming to bed regardless of whether or not I've found him. Don't go to sleep before I get back otherwise I'm waking you up and not letting you sleep all night." He kissed her forehead and left.

First he checked the guest wing. It was completely empty. He continued on with the search and found nothing in the next two wings.

Then he went to the only wing in his house he had literally never been in. It was his parents private wing. They had given it to the Dark Lord once he came back.

He heard voices and continued on. "She's a young girl and she's been through so much. Why are you doing this to her?"

"If she is my daughter like you say then why would I ever allow her to fight against me? NO. The Dark Mark is the only way to make sure she fights on our side."

"Whose side is that, Tom? Surely you didn't say OUR side because you'd be wrong there. There is now US. You know why? Because you and I are over."

"I won't let you leave me again, Helen."

"You're a murderer! You abuse my daughter. You took away my magic."

"Our daughter needed convincing."

"Why is she so damn important."

"Because she's the missing link. If she goes on their side, they'll win. She's too smart. She knows too much. If she fight against me, they win. If she gets the mark, Potter will be too incompetent to fight without his brainiac."

"Then kill him now and spare our daughter!"

"You think me a cowards to attack him defenseless? I do have my honor and I will not win because he was too rash. NO. When I win this, it will be in the midst of a great war with everyone there to watch."

"You're pathetic."

"What was that, my muggle loving wife? Please do try to remember that you have no power and I do plan on taking advantage of that."

Draco ran quickly out of that hall. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was Voldemort going to rape Helen now? He didn't know and he didn't plan on finding out.

On his way back to Hermione's room, he heard a small thud coming from up in the attic. "Stupid Weasley. Can't even sneak in good and proper," he thought to himself, heading up the stairs to the top of the house. When he got up there, he found more than he suspected.

"Hello," one of the Weasley twins said. "I'm George. This here is my twin, Fred and the little one is Ginny, our sister. 'Course you already know 'ickle Ronnekins, don't you?"

Draco glared at them. "Did all FOUR of you have to come? I have nowhere to hid you!"

"That's all right!" Fred smiled. "We know invisibility spells. We'll sleep up here for the night, invisible of course, and tomorrow we'll all bust out of here. The four of us, you, Hermione, and Harry. Sound good?"

He stifled a yawn and looked at them as though they were crazy. "Weasley, I can't believe you brought the whole family."

"I didn't bring them," Ron said in his own defense. "They followed me. Fred and George like adventures and trouble and Ginny, she well...um..."

"Fancy Potter, do you?" he asked Ginny with a smirk. She blushed as red as her hair. "Not to worry. Secrets safe with me. Now you lot get some sleep. Hermione'll be up in the morning to check on you." He left quickly eager to get back to Hermione before she had fallen asleep.

x x x

When Harry escaped, he ran to Hermione's room. She was laying in bed crying...with Malfoy right next to her. "Every time I go to sleep, Draco," she cried. "Why won't he ever go away?" They hadn't noticed Harry's presence and he decided to keep it that way.

"It's only normal to remember a traumatizing experience," Draco told her in comfort, holding her in his arms. "It will probably just take some time."

"But I... I thought that once he was gone, I'd be alright. I'd never have to worry about him again. When you went to find Ron, I fell asleep and he was there. He was there, Draco."

Harry took this as his cue to step forward, making them away he was in the room. "We shouldn't wait for morning," he told them. "It's time to go."

Chapter 24

Harry ran upstairs to find only Ginny sitting in a corner crying. "Where's Ron and the twins?" he questioned, running to her side. "What happened, Ginny?"

She choked back another sob and said sadly, "They found them...took them downstairs...said they'd be used as bait to lure you back...didn't know I was here...I..." she stopped talking and continued crying.

Harry was at a loss of what to do. He didn't want Ron or the twins to be hurt but he knew they had to leave the manor immediately. He took Ginny's hand and led her back to Hermione's room.

"Where are the others?" Draco asked.

"They've been captured. We have to leave now and come back for them," Harry informed them. "We'll come back with the whole Order."

Hermione was appalled. "Harry James Potter, how dare you! Ron's one of your best friends. Stop being so bloody selfish. We have to save him. Ginny, you go back to Hogwarts. This is no place for you. Shoo." Ginny was in no condition to argue and so she got on her broom and left. "Now, we need a strategy."

"I think it's safe to say we're going to be outnumbered," Draco stated.

"True," Hermione replied. "So that's why we need to be sneaky. It's not going to be a war. It's going to be a mission. We have four people to save: Ron, Fred, George, and my mum. I know that my mum is in her room and they're probably keeping the Weasley's in the dungeons. This means we're going to have to split up."

"Well wherever Voldemort is going to be, that's where we're going to have to send Scarhead," Draco announced. "Neither of us even have a chance at killing him so there's no way to defend ourselves."

"I'll save Hermione's mum," Harry said. "I'm sure that's where he'll be."

"Alright," Hermione agreed. "Here's the deal. You go by my mum's room. We need to make sure you don't go in until we've already got the Weasley's this way my dad's not aware of what's going on."

"Well how am I going to know when you've got them?"

"We're going to need a signal."

"But I won't be able to see you. We'll be on completely different floors." Both Harry and Hermione were stumped. They could think of no way to communicate once this plan was in action. Draco sighed and went to his room leaving behind a very confused Hermione.

When he returned, he had two tiny boxes in his hand. "It was going to be an engagement present," he confessed. He got down on one knee and took her hand in his. "This wasn't exactly the circumstances I would have liked to propose in but it'll have to do. Hermione, I love you. You truly saved my life this summer by being my friend and I'd be honored if you would be my wife."

She was nearly ready to faint, having not expected any of this. The ring in the box was just so gorgeous that she felt like crying. It was a gold band, simple yet beautiful, and it had one small square cut diamond right in the middle. "The ring reminded me of us. Simple and wonderful. I went for a square cut diamond because we're never able to cut corners. We always have to do things the hard way. But I want that. I want a hard life...with you. I want every day to be a challenge. I want to work for you and earn your love. Please say you'll be mine."

Harry almost laughed. He didn't know Malfoy had a single romantic bone in his entire body. And yet, here he was, down on one knee, saying all these sappy things that made Hermione cry.

"I have two conditions you have to abide by if you want me to say yes," she laughed. "Promise me you'll never touch our kids in a rough manner no matter how annoying or insolent they become. AND promise me that you'll love me forever."

He pretended to think on it and then replied, "The kid thing is no problem but I'm not so sure about the loving you forever part."

They both laughed and he slipped the ring on her finger. "I guess I have no choice but to agree to your commands," he smiled.

Harry coughed loudly to alert them of his presence. "I'm sorry to interrupt but we have a mission, remember?"

They both looked as though they had completely forgotten. "Oh right," Draco said. He took the other box and gave it to Harry. "I'm going to want this back, Potter."

"What does it do?"

"Well when a wizard gets engaged, he buys two rings. One for him and one for his fiancé. The rings are magical. They allow you to communicate with your partner. Since Hermione has the other ring, she'll be able to let you know when we've got the Weasley's. The ring will glow a bright gold. Think you can handle that?"

"Doesn't sound too hard," Harry replied, ignoring Draco's sarcasm. "So how do you think you'll be able to get to Ron? Won't they have them guarded?"

Hermione seemed to take her time thinking about this before responding. "Well I'm going to lure the guards away with a distraction and then Draco will help the boys escape."

"How are you going to lure them away?" Draco asked. "I hope you're not planning on seducing them. That wouldn't sound like a bright idea."

"Draco, I think you underestimate a woman's power to manipulate." They smiled and Harry couldn't help but think how cute they seemed together.

"Flirting at a time like this?" he joked. "What am I going to do with you two?"

"Can it, Potter," Draco replied. "Let's just get through this mission. Ready, Hermione?" She nodded her head and he took her hand to assuage her nerves. "Let's go then."

Hermione stopped before they left and kissed Harry's cheek. "Be careful. Don't be a hero or anything tonight. Just go and come back out. As soon as you get her, hop on a broom and leave. I'm not kidding Harry. Don't try to fight him if you can avoid it."

"You're wasting time, Hermione," Harry told her. "But thanks for the pep talk. I'll be sure to remember that." It wouldn't have seemed normal if she had not given him advice. After all, what use is it going into battle without the brains?

Hermione and Draco left quickly, making sure no one knew they were up. It was almost three a.m. and most of the guards they ran across were sleeping. Hermione only looked at them with scolding eyes. "If your boss knew you were sleeping on the job, what would he say?" she thought as she continued on.

Once they reached the dungeon doors, Hermione and Draco looked at each other. He could tell she was worried and she had every right to be. It was very risky to go against the Dark Lord, even if the whole Order had been there to back them up. But they were just two people and there were most likely about five or ten guards. He wondered briefly if Voldemort had even realized Harry's escape and as he was about to bring it up to Hermione, they heard voices coming and so they hid in the nearest closet.

"Voldemort said the kid went missing," one man said with a laugh. "Can't say I didn't see that coming. I mean, he DID ask the kids best friend to chain him up. She probably left the key right in his hand."

"The Dark Lord isn't stupid," the other said in his Lord's defense. "He knows what he's doing. It's probably all part of his master plan. You'll see."

"The guy can't even control his wife," the first replied. "Let alone his daughter. How are we supposed to believe he knows what he's doing if he can't even control two mere girls?" Hermione was about to give them a piece of her mind, not being able to accept that they would insult her like that, but Draco held her back.

"His daughter is really strong minded and you don't understand the circumstances," the other said. "It takes a long time to break such a strong witch. I'd like to see you try."

"Oh I'd break her all right," the first laughed. "I'd give it to her the same as Riley did. She'd be begging for me to stop and I'd just keep slamming into her tight..." He didn't get a chance to finish because Draco had already popped out of the closet and stupefied both guards.

"Pervert," he muttered before grabbing Hermione's hand and leading her down the dungeons. She stopped him and ran back towards the guards.

"We don't want anyone to see them and suspect," she told Draco as she carefully hid the men in the same closet they had been hiding. Then she placed invisibility charms on them so even if by chance someone opened the closet, they could not be seen. "Now we can go."

Creeping down, as quickly and quietly as they could, they reached the dungeons. They could hear the voices of the Weasley brothers and Draco almost laughed. "It doesn't sound like they're having too bad a time."

Hermione then listened to the conversation between Fred and George. "You know, I bet we could make a fortune off of this kind of stuff. We could sell little Death Eater toys - collect 'em all!"

"That'd be great, Fred. Smashing idea. I was also thinking we should make a toy that's like an apple and you give it to your teacher. Then when she bites into it, it turns her teeth purple!"

Ron gave out a loud sigh. "What in Merlin's name does that have to do with anything?"

"YOU THREE! SHUT UP!" One guard yelled. Hermione peeked over the wall they were hiding behind to see just three guards sitting in a corner.

"No, that can't be right," she whispered to herself.

"What do you mean?" Draco asked, not having chanced a look yet.

"There's only three guards," she informed him. "Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

He thought and then responded, "Yeah, that is weird. Can't be right. Are you sure you're not missing anyone? Check again."

"No, Draco, I'm sure. It must be a trap. What do you think we should do?"

"I think we need to distract the three that are there," he decided. "Distract them first then I'll go in. I'll handle the next batch and then we'll see where to go from there."

"Draco, you know I don't play things by ear. We need a clear plan. First I'll distract these three. I petrify them while you attempt to save the guys. If you're attacked, let them begin to lead you away while I go and get them. Then, the four of us will come for you."

"That's not a good plan, Granger," he laughed. "But I like it. Alright, so how do you plan on distracting them?"

"What if I told them that I found Harry and need them to come and contain him?"

"Sounds good. What if they don't go?"

"Then I'll kill them."

Harry sat in her room waiting for the sign. He looked at Draco's ring and smiled. He was so happy that his best friend had finally found someone so perfect for her. It was like everything was finally falling into place. Now it would all be up to him.

He would finally face Voldemort, after making sure Helen was all right of course. Even though Hermione had strongly suggested that he didn't fight Voldemort, he knew this was it. Sleep deprived and hungry, Harry was going to face his worst enemy.

Did they truly think he was stupid? Did they honestly believe he couldn't figure everything out? Everything was happening just as he had planned. Hermione had rescued Potter only to have the Weasley's captured. Then the Weasley girl, falling perfectly into his plan, had given them the ammunition to actually attempt a real rescue mission.

Yes, they would all be captured and killed and his final victory over Potter would be glorious.

The guards had of course followed Hermione at the chance to be the one to catch the famous Harry Potter. Their Lord would be so happy.

Of course, when they were stupefied and locked inside the same closet ones she had just taken care of with Draco, Hermione figured he'd probably be really mad. Why should she worry though? They were just Death Eaters.

Draco ran to where the Weasley's were and began unlocking their chains. He got Fred and George out. As he was unlocking Ron's, Hermione came back. "Quickly," she said. "Two Death Eaters saw me and I think they've alerted a lot more. I sent the message to Harry so we have to go."

They ran up the stairs and out of the dungeons only to find Harry, Helen, and Voldemort blocking their way.

They all backed down into the dungeon with fear, standing in the center of the room. "I caught Mr. Potter here trying to help 'save' your mum. How foolish he is," Voldemort said. "Then again, here you are Hermione, trying to save these muggle loving fools."

"I'M a muggle loving fool," Hermione said. "It doesn't make a difference to me."

"You are quite humorous, my daughter, but I think it's time this ends. LUCIUS!" Draco's father ran down to the dungeons immediately.

"What is happening, my Lord?" he questioned. "Draco, what have you done now?"

"I was just doing what was in my heart," he responded. "Nothing wrong with that, now is there?"

"You will apologize to the Dark Lord AT ONCE!"

"Or what, father? Are you going to beat me again? I'm sure the Dark Lord will handle your job much better than you ever did. I don't need to be beaten, though. I'm very thick-headed. Nothing ever gets through to me."

"Don't antagonize them, Draco," Hermione whispered. "I know you've never really been in this situation before where we're greatly outnumbered and all, but let me assure you, it's very dangerous."

Draco only scoffed. "I'm sure."

"Lucius, I was you to tell your son what happened to your wife this afternoon," Voldemort hissed. "Tell him what happened after she tried to go to the Order for help. After she tried to give them information in order to SPARE her own life, what did they do to her?"

Tears actually threatened to spill out of Lucius but he kept his façade of pride. "They killed her son. Your mother died today."

"See? You can't switch now. They wouldn't trust you."

Hermione took Draco in an embrace as he kept whispering to himself, "This CAN'T be true. This CAN'T be true." He fell to his knees and Hermione went with him, resting his head on her shoulder and clinging to her for dear life.

And the war had truly started, Hermione thought with sadness.

Chapter 25

Hermione was holding Draco in her arms. The news of his mother's death had hurt even more than any of his father's beatings. It seemed as though his whole world had shattered.

"How heartless do you have to be to use this to your advantage?" Hermione asked Voldemort. "You could never be my father."

His eyes were flaring and the room shook in his anger. "Don't start up with me again, girl," he commanded. "You keep challenging me. Well I've had enough."

"Oh come off it," she replied. She detached herself from Draco and stood up to be eye level with the villain she saw in front of her. "You're ALL talk."

He slapped her across the cheek and she practically flew across the room. As she hit the wall, she saw something - no, someone - in the doorway. "It's about bloody time," she sighed.

"How dare you lay a hand on your own daughter," Sirius Black said in outrage. "Where I come from, we treat ladies with respect. I guess someone didn't have a very good upbringing."

Voldemort looked astonished. "You were dead!" he hissed.

"He wasn't dead," Hermione heard Remus Lupin say as he entered the room from a door on the opposite side of the room. "He was just trapped. Your Death Eater Scum could never actually succeed in killing as great a wizard as Sirius Black. It's an insult that you ever thought his death to be true."

Harry and Ron both let out a small laugh and looked to see Voldemort's anger flare. "Can you two please just grab the Weasley's and leave?" Hermione asked in annoyance. "Harry, Draco, and I have business to finish here."

Harry sighed. "Stop trying to rush this!" he yelled at her. "I'll face him when I'm ready and I'm NOT yet!"

"Harry, this has to end," Hermione told him. "It's ending today. I won't worry about him coming after me for months or even years to come. It's got to be over. Please."

"Herms, you know I love you," he said with a kind voice. Her sadness was worrying him. He had never seen her so weak before this year began. "I just think that if we fight now..."

"We'll win," Hermione stated, gaining more confidence than before. "Remus, get my mother the hell out of here!" she commanded. "Everyone else is staying and we're ending this."

"My little naïve daughter," Voldemort chuckled. "Your mother is mine...as are you. The sooner you learn that, the better. Even Potter has admitted he could never win. Give up."

"You still don't get it, do you," she stated. It wasn't even a question. "I'm NOT a quitter. I will fight for what I believe is right and I will never give up. My heart tells me that giving in to you is wrong and so I won't do it. Maybe I haven't made myself clear yet. I am not like you. Blood has never meant anything to me and I'd rather die than be related to you, you stupid prick! I wish you would..."

"CRUCIO!" She was on the ground before she could even finish her sentence. As soon as her knees hit the floor, Voldemort had seven wands pointed at him in fury. Harry, Draco, Fred, George, Ron, Sirius, and Remus were all quite protective of the girl who had doubled over in pain. Directly after their wands were raised, another ten or so death eaters entered the room and lifted their wands as well.

"My son," Lucius hissed. "Point your wand in another direction. You are disgracing me. How can you do this to your poor father? Don't leave me without a family all together boy."

"Did my dear cousin Narcissa finally leave you?" Sirius questioned with what seemed like a knowing smile on his face. "It's about damn time."

Hermione seemed confused. "Why do you say that, Sirius? That's not funny. You should know, right? I mean, she was killed, wasn't she? They said..."

"Who told you she was killed?"

"I thought the Order killed her after she..."

"Whoever told you that was way off, darling. Narcissa showed up yesterday asking for protection, protection that we were more than happy to offer her. She'll be sent to Azkaban for a few years of course. I mean, her crimes cannot go unpunished but the sentence has been shortened a great deal."

Draco, who had been listening with nervous hope, nearly cried out. "You tried to trick me!" he screamed, pointing his wand now directly at Lucius.

"What are you doing, boy?" his father asked. "Put down your wand."

"You wanted me to point it in another direction, didn't you father? Well I think it's about time you got a taste of your own medicine. Maybe a cruciatus or even..."

"Draco, don't be foolish. Everyone here has their wand out. You'll be dead before you can even say Avada Kedavra." Lucius tossed his long blond hair behind his shoulder in an aristocratic manner. The grey in his eyes stormed in anger at his own son's arrogance. He had hoped to have raised him better.

"This is going to be one hell of a war," Draco responded, his own eyes reflecting the anger of his father's. "STUPEFY!"

"EXPELLIARMUS!" The spells collided with one another and a huge clash of green and silver exploded in the air and soon everyone was attacking.

Hermione's first thought was her mother. She reached Helen and grabbed her hand. "Mum, get out of here now!" she demanded. "Go out through the back door. Run quickly and don't look back. Hide in the woods. I'll come for you when this is over. You can't protect yourself here. GO!"

Their glistening eyes met and Hermione grew worried. She had never seen her mother cry. This was something that made Hermione think

twice about leaving Helen on her own. Unfortunately, she knew they needed everyone there to fight and could sacrifice no one to the final battle.

Finally Helen did as her daughter said but not before giving her a last hug and a kiss. "I'm so proud of you," she whispered, running out as quick as she could.

Hermione then turned her attention to the rest of the dungeons. It was a war. More Order members had appeared as well as Death Eaters. She saw Harry taking on two Death Eaters at once as well Sirius and Remus. Draco was battling with his father while Fred and George were dueling Crabbe and Goyle. The smiles on their faces told Hermione that they were winning.

She checked around the room for Ron but couldn't find him anywhere. Finally she looked to the steps and saw him on the third stair, clutching his stomach tightly. Her father was right behind him cackling loudly.

"RON!" Hermione screamed, running in his direction. She was stopped by a woman with black hair and eyes the color of her soul.

"I gave you all the lessons a girl could ever need and you still just had to go and ruin your life like this," she smiled. "Well at least this will be more fun than fighting with you. Hope it was worth it."

Hermione just put on a smirk of her own. "Oh it's all going to be worth it. Just you wait and see." She lifted her arm and punched Bellatrix right in the face. "Take that you insane bitch." She looked around to see who needed help as Bellatrix had passed out on the stone floor.

Ron had moved on to a different opponent while her father had sat down on his throne. He was watching the whole scene play out with a wicked smile on his face. Things were going to be over now.

She saw Harry move out of the corner of her eye and begin walking through the center of the room. All around her people were crying out in pain and dying. Everyone was fighting and this was war after all.

Nymphadora Tonks was one of the few people she recognized that had fallen already. Her pink hair stood out brightly against the gray of the stone floor.

Then she saw George. Or was it Fred? She couldn't tell but he had been hurt badly and needed some attention.

But her gaze soon shifted over to her top priority.

Draco.

He and his father were in a serious duel. The blood lust in their eyes was enough to surge through the entire dungeon. She ran to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. Killing his father may not be something he was ready to do and she wanted to make sure he understood what he was doing.

"I'll do it for you if you need me to," she whispered, watching Lucius panting on the floor. Draco had already gotten him pretty good. It was just one last spell to end it.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!" Draco screamed. "I want him to rot for the rest of his life in Azkaban. This time there's no getting out."

She kissed him on the cheek and then gave him instructions. "Neville is fighting Zabini and he needs some help if you could. Then go around and help anyone else. We're going to need help with healing people too."

"What about you?"

"I have my work cut out for me."

She ran to find Ron and watched as he fell to the floor. "NO!" Two seconds too late. She cursed herself for not going sooner. She didn't know if he was dead or just hurt but she had no time to think about it because soon she was on the floor after being hit by the Cruciatus once more.

And then there he was. Scabb...NO!

He wasn't Scabbers. Never was.

It was that rotten Peter Pettigrew, the traitor. He was grinning like mad over Ron as he approached.

"Pettigrew, I swear if you touch one more hair on his head I swear..." she warned.

"You'll what? You're going to send your cat after me?" he replied snidely. His dirty blond hair fell into his eyes.

"I'll use my first killing curse. Believe me, I can do it."

"I think that when I kill you, I'll use that hot little body of yours to satisfy my own sexual urges. What do you think?" His big buck teeth fell over his bottom lip as he tried to snarl - unsuccessfully. His snarl wound up sounding like a cough or a sneeze.

"Don't be a moron, Pettigrew. You could never actually take on a strong witch like me. You weren't even brave enough to fess up to the betrayal of Lily and James Potter. I ought to kill you right now."

"You act so brave but I know what hides beneath those fatal eyes. You're trying to hide the worry, the weakness, the exhaustion. But I see it. You can't hide it from ME."

She raised her wand and pointed it right at his throat. "You're not even worth a reply. AVADA KED..."

"NO!" It was Sirius Black and he had grabbed her arm just in time. "No, Hermione. This one is mine. I've waited far too long to do this and it's going to be me."

"Now Sirius," Peter whimpered. "You wouldn't kill one of your best friends, now, would you?"

"I think you need a lesson in friendship." Hermione looked Sirius in the eye and could tell this was what he had been waiting for. It was after all only a few years ago that he had tried to complete this task and failed. Now he had every chance and she was not about to stand in his way.

She ran on to help Ron out and check on his condition but was stopped by Bellatrix once more. "Thought you'd gotten away, did you?"

"Get your filthy paws off of me. I'm warning you," Hermione said with malice. "I have no patience for this. I have to go help Ron. Let me through and I promise not to kill you."

"You can't put a war on pause you stupid wench. It's time we duel."

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Ron had been hit pretty hard. He didn't know what spell Pettigrew had used but he knew it wasn't too bad. No lasting effects anyway.

He got up and saw Hermione dueling a woman with long black hair and a pale skin complexion. He soon recognized this as the woman that had been responsible for Sirius' disappearance. "Get her good, Herm," he called out. Just then he saw Bellatrix fall to the floor in a heap. Her black hair covered her face and she made no more movement. "Is she dead?" he asked. Had Hermione really just killed someone? It seemed so unreal.

Hermione nodded her head in response. Power was surging through her as she relished the feeling. She had the power to end lives and it was all in her little wand. Well, no. Actually, it was inside of HER. The wand was just a tool that the magic had passed through.

"I did kill her, Ron," she said with a low voice. "And I'm not sorry about it either."

She then looked around the room and saw Harry moving to where her father sat. "It's time," she told Ron. "It's all about to end and we our part in it all is over. Now all we can do is sit back and watch."

Chapter 26

All eyes were fixated on the front of the room. Harry was approaching his nemesis with his wand at his side. This was it, the moment they had all been waiting for. The past six and a half years flashed before him in a blur.

"You hurt Hermione," Harry said. "I'm going to make you pay for that." He took another step forwards. "You abused her mother and kept her prisoner. YOU HURT MY BEST FRIEND!"

"She is my daughter," Voldemort hissed. "I have every right. That is the one thing I have done that YOU have no right to criticize. What a man does within his own family is no one's concern."

"You're sick! You've attacked my friends, tried to get at me, AND killed my parents!"

"Don't you ever let the past die?" he laughed. "They're dead, Potter, and you didn't even get a chance to know them. How can you miss people you hardly even knew?"

"CRUCIO!" Harry had never used this curse before. It was really just torture. He had no need to torture anyone. But as soon as Voldemort spoke about his parents, he knew what he had to do.

Hermione watched her father shake in his seat. Unfortunately his pain was nowhere near as great as the pain he had inflicted upon her.

But something was better than nothing, right?

Hermione could've slapped herself for that thought. 'Revenge isn't the way,' she thought angrily. 'All I want is to save my mum and make sure everyone can live safely. Beyond that, the law should take care of it.'

"That was pathetic," she heard her father laugh. "No look. You got yourself all worked up, raised your wand, used an unforgivable and for what? I'm sure you were expecting me to be shocked or in pain but guess what. I am neither."

"Harry, don't let him get to you," Hermione said. "He's trying to break you down. Don't let him. You're stronger than that."

"Silence!" Voldemort roared. "I think we all know this is going nowhere. Your puny hero here cannot defeat me even with years of practice. Crabbe, Goyle! Go get her mother from the woods. She's waiting for you. Bring her back."

"NO!"

"SILENCE!" The room echoed his command with a violent thunder.

Hermione however did not back down. "You can yell all you want. Get yourself worked up. I - don't - care! If your two big oafish friends bring my mother back here, I swear by the Gods that all hell will break loose."

Crabbe and Goyle Senior awaited further commands. Her father, much like herself, remained stubborn. "Crabbe - Goyle," he began slowly, drawing out each name as if to intentionally irritate Hermione. "GO GET HER!" The two somewhat thuggish men left, following their masters orders.

"No," Hermione gasped, unbelieving of her fathers demand.

Harry tried to think quickly. What should he do? He only knew two unforgivables and he was fairly certain the killing curse wouldn't work for him. He was after all only a boy.

"Voldemort," Harry addressed the mad man in the front of the room. "I challenge you to a duel."

Everyone in the room was confused. A magic duel? Voldemort was certain he could win that. "What's the catch?" he asked with a small smile. Yes, there was always a catch.

"No catch really," Harry smiled. "A fair duel. Fight to the death. Just you and me. A fair sword duel... muggle style."

That was the catch. No magic. Just a good clean sword fight... to the death.

Having too much pride for his own good, Voldemort accepted.

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The duelers were set to go. an old man against a young boy - an interesting match. Both had been well trained in the art of swordsmanship.

Harry had studied with Remus for the past several years and more recently with Sirius. They had made sure he was prepared for anything and everything.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, Harry?" Ron asked. "This isn't a game anymore. At the end of that sword is a really scary blade. He only has to slice you once and you're dead."

"Yeah but I've got a sword in my hand as well, Ron," Harry assured him. "So the same goes for me. One good hit and he's gone."

"He's got my mum," Hermione whispered, rocking back and forth in her seat. "She's sitting right next to him on his left, right now."

Draco patted her back. "I don't know if it helps but just letting you know, there are only three of the top dogs left. My aunt and dead are both down for the count so I think we could take the rest. Sirius finished off Pettigrew in the blink of an eye. Well he didn't actually killed the bloke."

"Damn right I didn't," Sirius added. "That fat tub of lard is going to rot in Azkaban for the rest of his life. I'll make damn sure of that."

"Is this supposed to make me feel better, you two?" Hermione asked. "You really stink at cheering people up, Draco. You know that, right?"

"I've told you that before, haven't I?"

"Stop talking, the three of you," Ron said. "Harry's about to start the duel now, I don't want anyone distracting him and no offense 'Mione but if he's worrying about your mum then I don't think he'll concentrate as well."

"Ron, I'm fine," Harry said. "I'm just a little... nervous."

Hermione smiled. "I have faith in you," she said. "You're my hero, win or lose. You've saved my life so many times before and if this time you cannot, I know it was my time. We can only escape death so many times before it finally comes knocking on our door."

"Don't be morbid, Herms," Harry said. "I'm going to win and even if I don't, I know Ron and Draco will protect you."

"Harry," a small voice said behind him in barely a whisper. It was Ginny. "Please be careful."

"Ginny? When did you get back?"

"Don't get yourself killed out there, Harry," she demanded. "I really would like you to come back alive and well." Her red hair fell in front of her pale face, shielding her from exposing her true worries.

A grin graced Harry's face. "And just why would you like a thing like that to happen?"

She sighed. So he was going to play dumb? Well she had nothing to hide anymore. "Because I think I'm in love with you, Harry James Potter. I love you and I want you to come back and tell me you feel the same."

"I do..."

"Don't tell me now," she giggled. "I want to hear it when you come back to me. So be safe, okay?"

"I promise, Gin." He leaned in and their lips hovered right above each others when they heard a truly deafening hiss.

"POTTER! It's time to duel, boy," Voldemort snarled. "Say goodbye to all your puny friends and fami - oh wait. You don't have a family. Ever so sorry about that."

"I'M HIS FAMILY!" Hermione and Ron both shouted in unison. It wasn't intentional. It was just truly how they both felt.

"Oh how sweet. The Golden Trio sticks together even in the end. Don't worry, though. As soon as I finish off Potter, I'll be sure you don't have too much time to grieve."

"You're not going anywhere near the," Harry stated with a voice full of confidence and power. "I'm going to finally get my revenge for my parents and fallen friends."

Their swords fell heavy upon the others as they struck with all the force they could muster. The clinking of metal hitting metal made Hermione nervous.

She wished she could help Harry but he was on his own with this one. It was time he finally learned to stand alone. She knew there was nothing she could do now except to wait.

"Give it up, Potter," Voldemort hissed, knocking Harry backwards. "I'm twice as strong as you."

Harry quickly got back on his feet and began bouncing around, preparing for another strike. "You may be right," he agreed. "But you're also three times my age and getting quite old. I have a lot more energy. Hell, I could do this all night."

Voldemort scowled and lunged towards Harry in a raging fury. Harry successfully dodged the attack and wound up tripping his opponent in the process. "See?" he laughed. "All night."

The metal clinking sound began once more as they matched each other blow for blow. No matter who was striking they each seemed to be ready for the other's move.

Harry went on the defensive. His strategy - wear Voldemort out. Get him tired and then he would make his final strike.

They wound up circling one another for a while, Voldemort trying to regain his energy and Harry waiting for an attack. "You know you can't take much more of this," Harry muttered. "It's only a matter of time."

"Go to hell, Potter!" Voldemort snarled. Finally, they both went to strike again. The swords struck and sounded one last time and then, as he was falling to the floor in exhaustion, he felt the cold stab of the blade ripping through his chest, piercing the heart and he looked around the room for a loving face.

"Helen," he called out. Tom Riddle's wrinkled hands clung to his chest and he just looked sad. Not the pathetic type of sad but a real and true emotion actually crossed his face. "Helen," he called again.

To everyone surprise, she ran to his side. "I'm here, Tom," she whispered. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere." She knelt down, her knees nearly touching the blood that had begun to seep onto the ground around him. She clutched his hand in both of hers and brought it to her lips.

"I'll always love you," he said, his voice breaking, sounding course yet gentle for the first time ever. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I never showed you just how much I loved you. Please. Forgive me."

A lonely tear streamed down her face. "I already did." Her hands held onto his until his skin began to burn.

"I suggest you stand back, Helen," Remus said. "I wouldn't want you to get hurt." Voldemort was going to burn with his hatred. His death would be slow and painful. Though he was not killed with magic, a greater force was at work.

Love.

Helen ignored Rums' warning and leaned in to whisper in Tom's ear, "I never stopped loving you." As his entire body lit on fire, Remus and Sirius pulled her away.

No one could understand Helen's reaction to Voldemort's death but at that point, it didn't quite matter. The battle was over now and though they had sustained many losses, the Order had won.

With Draco by her side, Hermione was able to smile, somewhat triumphantly, until her mother walked up to her and slapped her

across the cheek. "He was your father," Helen reprimanded. "How can you be so cold/"

She grimaced at the sound of her mothers voice. "He taught me how," she replied, her hand flying to her stinging cheek. "What gotten into you anyhow? It's not like he treated us right. He was a jerk!"

"He was the love of my life!" Helen responded. "And he was your father. It never mattered what he did to me. He knew I'd love him all the same."

"But he took away your magic!"

"I would have gotten it back, one way or another. I loved him. Don't you think that's all that matters" Hermione looked at Draco when her mother mentioned love. Helen was right. All that mattered was love, the warm tingling feeling in your heart telling you that you're meant to be together. The fear that you could never live with this person. Hermione knew this feeling all too well.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard Sirius talking to Remus. "That's all it took, Rem. No magic. All Harry had to do was kill him the muggle way. How ironic that a man who hated muggles to a point of insanity could be killed just like the very thing he despised."

She collapsed on the floor feeling completely lost.

Chapter 27

Things happened too quickly for Hermione after the last battle. Everything had gone back to normal and they had graduated Hogwarts in late May. Though Hermione was glad to have gotten her N.E.W.T.'s done and over with, she wasn't glad to be leaving school.

It was their last day. All their trunks were packed. Graduation had taken place the day before and after several tear-jerking stories and speeches, it was all done with. All that was left was to get on the Hogwarts Express one last time and that would be the end of it.

Hermione placed the last of her things in her trunk and trekked down the stairs to the common room. There she found Draco sitting on the couch with the Prophet in his hands. "They're still talking about it," he informed her. "Today they're questioning if the battle really DID happen. They're putting people under the veritaserum to check who's telling the truth. Of course my father has his crazy ideas and all but..."

"But it'll all turn out right in the end. Trust me, Draco. Now let's get these trunks shrunk. We're going to be late." She took out her wand and Draco did the same. Before they even knew it, the trunks were the size of peas and inside their pockets.

"Where are Potter and Weasley?" Draco asked as they shuffled out the portrait hole.

"They're saying goodbye to Hagrid. Honestly, those two were acting as though we'd never see anyone from here again." She said it in a joking manner because it was easier than admitting that she was feeling the same way. Her uneasy laugh gave her away.

"We'll see them again, love," Draco assured her. "Who knows? Before long, I'm sure you'll be back and teaching."

She gasped. "Heavens, no, Draco! I don't want to teach. I just want to find a decent job at the Ministry..."

"As the Mistress of Magic?" He laughed at the idea. Hermione Granger, Mistress of Magic, running the wizarding world. 'Well,' he thought, 'at least she'll be better than Fudge.'

"I don't know about Mistress of Magic, Draco, but something or someone that makes a difference. I want to be there in a crisis and I want to help people. I want to make sure no one like Voldemort ever gains that much power again. I want to affect the world."

"I'm sure you will," he told her, holding her hand as they walked down the hallway.

They got to the train station and Hermione held back tears. It was all happening so quickly and she barely even remembered when it had all started. She remembered being a small first year, making great friends and a few enemies. She remembered being petrified in second year and waking up to hear Harry's wonderful story about Tom Riddle and the basilisk. She remembered the breakout of Sirius Black and her use of the Time Turner. She vaguely recalled her fourth year spent with Victor Krum. And of course fifth year, she remembered the Order of the Phoenix all too well.

But somehow, she knew that years later, the year she would most remember would be her seventh year. The year she fell in love with Draco Malfoy.

He held onto her hand a little tighter when he realized she was lost in thought. "Hermione, love," he said in a soft and soothing voice. "We have to get on the train or it'll take off without us."

She smiled back at him. "You love me, right?"

"What?"

"I mean, we're engaged obviously and plan on being wed but...well...I just need to make sure. I love you so much and I guess I'm just nervous that..."

"You're thinking that since everything is going so well, eventually the bottom has to fall out?" She nodded her answer. "I think you're worrying too much. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to go back to Malfoy Manor where we will live. We will be wed soon and have lots and lots of little Hermione's and Draco's running around. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like a lot of hard work. Kids are a big hassle Draco!"

"I know but it'll all be worth it. Now come on. The train waits for no one."

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Hermione awoke to the sound of the train slowing down. No, wait. It had stopped. What was going on? The lights were out in her compartment and she was all alone. She stood up slowly in nervousness.

"Draco?" she called out, hoping he was right outside the door. But no one was there. She pulled her hair back from out of her face and tied it in a ponytail. "Draco?" she called once more, thinking maybe he just hadn't heard her the first time.

She slowly pushed back the compartment door and stepped out.

The hallway was empty. Not a soul was in sight. Everywhere she turned she found darkness and silence. Though she found complete emptiness, she saw no signs of a struggle. That was a good sign, she thought.

She moved to another compartment to look inside. Still no luck. Twelve compartments she checked and twelve rooms of nothing is what she found. Suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder and in fear, she froze up.

The lights flickered with her nervous energy and then went out again.

She didn't dare turn around for fear of finding someone who she truly wished was dead. The hand didn't move. It just sat there for the most part, not moving at all.

"Finally woke up?"

She sighed in relief and turned to face Ron. "You scared me half to death, Ronald Weaslery," she scolded. "What's going on?"

He laughed and messed up her hair a little bit. "We're all in the first half of the train having a big party. We were going to wake you but you just seemed so peaceful."

"Well why are we stopped?"

Ron laughed once more. "That would be because there was a bit of a shaking sensation what with all the dancing and all. The train had begun to rock and the driver didn't like it too much. We should be starting up again soon, though."

"Oh. Alright. Well, have you seen Draco?"

"Yeah. Malfoy's at the party. Didn't want to wake you, that's all. Said you looked really peaceful or whatever. Too mushy for my liking. I didn't really want to listen."

Hermione laughed and pushed his arm playfully. "Let's go join the party, Ron."

"Sure." He led her through the empty corridors and soon opened a door to the next train. As soon as the door opened, music filled the air. Everywhere you looked, people were dancing and partying, trying to have a good last goodbye.

She spotted her fiancé over in the corner, talking with someone. Was that Harry? They were getting along? Since when? She walked towards them with a worried feeling in her stomach. All she could think of was that it was possible they were having another row. In that case, this would not be a fun day for her.

But as she got closer, she heard calm voices...civil.

"Hermione," Draco finally said, just then noticing her presence. "When did you wake up, love?" he asked. "I thought you were out cold. You seemed exhausted."

"I just woke up. Ron came and found me. What's going on?"

"Potter and I were just discussing wedding plans. I asked him to be my best man."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "You did? Oh Draco that's so sweet but really, you don't have to. I don't mind if you want to choose one of your friends."

"My friends don't mean half as much to me as yours do to you. I'd rather you be happy."

Hermione suddenly looked sad. "But who's going to walk me down the aisle."

"I WILL!" She looked around to see Ron looking so very excited at the thought. "Oh please 'Mione, let me walk you down the aisle. I mean, I'm not too happy that you're marrying this git and all but I..."

Hermione laughed and cut him off. "Okay, Ron. You can walk me down the aisle. No need to give me your resume." He was so ecstatic that he quickly wrapped his arms around her and embraced her in a tight hug.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Hermione, Harry, and Draco all watched Ron run off in glee and the three shared a tiny chuckle. "I think you just made him the happiest man in the world," Draco commented with a heavy sigh.

"Wasn't that supposed to be you when I said yes to marrying you?" Hermione replied teasingly.

"Well I mean, maybe I would have been that happy if I wasn't going to be stuck with you now for the rest of my life," he retaliated, his arm wrapping around her waist.

Harry pretended to gag. "Ew. Gross. No flirting in front of me, please. Should I be expecting little Hermione's and Malfoy anytime soon?"

Hermione smiled. "It's possible. You just never know."

Draco's jaw dropped. "You're not...you're not keeping anything from me, right?"

She thought Draco's reaction was absolutely priceless. Hermione couldn't help the laughter from coming out. "No Draco," she assured him. "I'm not pregnant. And I'd prefer not to be pregnant until after we're married. Speaking of which, it's time we set a date and a place. Where do we want to have it? Outside or in a big church? I was thinking a traditional wedding would be best. With lots of flowers. Not too big of course. I mean, the only family I have is my mum, Harry and Ron. And of course we have to book a party hall for after the ceremony. Unless you didn't want that and wanted to go straight to the honeymoon. Oh my! The honeymoon. I almost forgot about it entirely. Where do you want to go? And..."

"Breathe, love," Draco finally interrupted. "Breathe. We have plenty of time to discuss wedding plans. For now, let's just worry about the summer."

"But Hermione's got a point," Harry said. "You at least need a date. I mean, come September, Ron and I are starting Auror training. We'll have training everyday for six months. And I know you guys are going to be looking for jobs and stuff."

"I've actually got a job lined up in the Ministry," Hermione beamed with pride. "I'll be working of...well I'm not too sure yet. They basically told me the other day that I could get a job doing whatever I wanted and they'd be sure to create a position if need be. I told them that as long as no one else loses a job on my behalf I'd be delighted to start in a few weeks."

"That's our Hermione, always on top of the game. One step ahead of the game, right?"

Hermione hugged Harry tightly with a small smile. "I wouldn't be here without you, you know. None of us would."

"Hermione I..."

"Seven years of solving mysteries and stopping evil, Harry, and you still don't get it. Sure, you can be modest and all. But everyone else knows that it was because of you that we were able to maintain our freedom and our safety. Don't even try to fool me by saying it was all

of us. I was selfish. I fought for myself and for my mum. You fought for the wizarding world."

"Don't even go there. You're one of the most selfless and bravest people I've ever met."

A cough interrupted their conversation. "Sorry but I don't fancy hearing all the mush. It's too sensitive and I'm just not that kind of guy. Then again, I never pictured you, Potter, as that kind of guy either. Funny what Hermione can do to men."

Harry hugged Hermione once more and then walked off to go find Ginny, leaving Hermione and Draco alone. "I was thinking this summer we'd go backpacking for a few weeks. Travel through France," Hermione suggested hopefully as Draco took her in his arms and smiled down on her.

"Backpacking, yeah?" He kissed her chastely. "Sounds fun."

"We'll check out the beaches of Normandy and then take a boat ride in Venice. But we'll be walking so don't get any funny ideas about apparating or flying brooms. We fought my dad for the right to do things the muggle way so that's how we're going to do it."

"I wouldn't dream of arguing."

"Sirius told me the other day that they were able to cut your mothers Azkaban visit out of the whole deal. Did you hear from her lately?"

"Yeah. She's got some probation and they took away her wand. She got off real lucky but I'm not sure I'm fond of how much time she's spending with that guy, Lupin. It's weird."

"Sirius told me that Remus and your mum actually dated a while back."

"Yeah?"

"Let your mum be happy, Draco. Let her find what we have found." The kiss they shared was nothing short of wonderful as magic flowed all around them.

It was like watching the fire works explode inside the Hogwarts Express. Hermione's eyes fluttered closed as she let the feeling of completion overwhelm her. Forever and always now, all that mattered was Draco.

He had saved her from Hell and now delivered her to heaven. The love they had known would only intensify as the years went on and the legacy they had all left behind would never be forgotten.

Stranded no longer.

The End